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The Mystery of Nine

BY

WILLIAM LE QUEUX

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CHAPTER I

THE NIGHT OF THE TENTH

On the evening of the 10th of December last year, at a quarter past six o'clock, I turned from the electric brightness and busy bustle of the High Street, Kensington, into Argyll Road, that short, quiet thoroughfare within a stone's-throw of the Underground Station.

The day had been dark, dreary, and misty, with much mud underfoot, a typical winter's day in our dear dirty old London, but now that the grey twilight of the brief afternoon had deepened into darkness, the fog had become dense, until, as I walked up the quiet road towards my town house, situated about half-way up on the right-hand side, I could scarcely see across the way.

Just as I approached my own door there loomed up out of the gloom the figure of a man in silk hat and dark overcoat, hurrying in the direction whence I had come, and so suddenly that we almost collided.

In the blurred uncertain lamplight his countenance

was in the shadow as he passed, but he struck me as a grey-moustached man of about fifty, lithe, active, erect, and well-dressed. He seemed in a great hurry, yet, as he walked, his right hand was thrust into the breast of his overcoat, while his left swung at his side.

Being myself approaching the light, I could not see his face distinctly, though I noted that he had curiously prominent eyes, such as are often seen in a Hebrew. In addition, a fine diamond in his cravat caught the light and flashed back red and green. Yet so sudden was our encounter that he was startled, for he halted just an instant to look shrewdly into my face, then he went forward, and next second disappeared from my view.

He had passed me swiftly—a mere shadow in the mist—and curiously enough in complete silence. He must have worn shoes with rubber-soles, for he moved without a sound. I halted to listen, but I could hear no footfall.

Then I ascended the steps leading to my own front-door, and entering with my latchkey, quickly forgot the incident.

Men who have the habit of wearing rubber-heels upon their boots often move noiselessly, therefore the incident was, after all, quite an everyday one, and as such I dismissed it.

In order that, from the outset, you should understand matters aright, I suppose I ought to introduce myself, and explain my own position. Indeed, I am

placing here on record the amazing facts, just as they occurred, and describing in plain, straightforward language what actually happened to me, with but one purpose, namely, in order that the stigma hitherto resting upon certain persons—and one in particular—shall be for ever removed, and the actual truth shall at last be made plain.

If you are a reader of the daily newspapers—as no doubt you are—then you have only learnt an incomplete and garbled story of the affair.

But now, when you read this plain statement which it is my intention to pen and to publish, certain facts will, no doubt, be recalled to your mind—facts which, you will recollect, so puzzled the readers of the newspapers half the world over.

My name is Vesey—Hubert Vesey—my age twenty-nine, and until the death of my Aunt Georgina, three years ago, I practised medicine, and after leaving Guy's acted as *locum tenens* to various practitioners up and down the country. From a financial point of view mine was, after all, but a poor profession. Yet it had given me a good insight into general practice, and a good deal of experience of the idiosyncrasies of various medical men. At my aunt's death, however, I suddenly found myself possessor of that rather dingy, old-fashioned house and furniture in Argyll Road, together with a very snug income from ground-rents in London.

Having resigned my engagement with a doctor

in Exeter—an incompetent and whisky-loving individual—I came to London, and after settling my aunt's affairs went abroad for nearly two years. Then, on my return, I had settled down to a bachelor-life in the old-fashioned, early Victorian house in Kensington. My intention was not to lead an idle life—far from it. I was constantly advertising in the *Lancet* for a practice, and when I could find one in a pleasant neighbourhood I intended to purchase it.

On the night in question I had only been back in England about a couple of months, having been on a long visit to my elder brother, who was British Minister at Sofia. I had had a most interesting time in the Balkans, and had returned to find myself quite an authority upon the tangled question of politics in that region of unrest which my brother had termed "the powder-magazine of Europe."

My home, as I entered it that foggy evening, was, indeed, dingy and grim after the brightness and gaiety of that ultra-modern capital, Sofia. I went along the wide old-fashioned hall, where the gas-jet glimmered in a stained-glass lantern, and past the dining-room and into the back sitting-room beyond, which I now used as my own den, before I suddenly recollected that Phelps—my man—and his wife were both out.

With my permission they had left at four o'clock to go up to Hampstead to see their married daughter, news of whose sudden illness they had received that

morning; therefore, being alone, I would be compelled to dine at the club. They had lighted the gas before leaving.

Their service with my Aunt Georgina had extended over thirty years, therefore, when I had entered upon possession of the house I had taken them over as part of my legacy. As a matter of fact, I had known Phelps ever since I had known myself, for he had been a great favourite of my late father, and had been born on my grandfather's estate in Hampshire. He was a perfect servant—old-fashioned, of course, but loyalty itself.

The room in which I stood was the reverse of artistic—a very gloomy, ill-lit place by day, with heavy, old-fashioned mahogany furniture, highly polished, a carpet once green, but now brown with age, and dark green painted walls, upon which hung several time-mellowed landscapes in oils, surrounded by heavy frames blackened by half a century of London smoke.

The only notes of modernity were the new American roll-top desk and a big saddle-bag easy-chair at the fireside, and a telephone instrument, which I had introduced there. Of the rest, the dingy old room was the same as it had been in the year of the Great Exhibition.

A fire was blazing cheerfully in the grate as I flung myself into my arm-chair, filled my pipe and lit it; then, leaning back at ease, I gazed up through the smoke to the two bronze figures of wrestlers on

either side of the black marble clock upon the mantel-shelf.

Only the low ticking of that clock broke the silence.

I was reflecting upon a sad story told me by an old college friend whom I had met, seedy and down-at-heel, that afternoon while walking along Knightsbridge, a clever man who had read for the Bar, but had recently fallen upon misfortune, when suddenly, just as the clock struck half-past six, I was startled by a violent ring at the front-door bell, followed by a second peal in quick succession.

It was a hurried, impetuous summons, and recollecting that I was alone in the house, I sprang to my feet and went along the hall.

With indignation I threw open the door, when, to my great surprise, I was confronted by a pretty young girl, who, with her hand clutching her breast in evident excitement, gasped in breathless eagerness—

"Ah! Dr. Vesey, let me in here! Give me shelter! Hide me! do, I—I beg of you! I know you are a gentleman, so I've come here to—to throw myself upon your mercy!"

I stood staring at her open-mouthed. She was a perfect stranger to me. How she knew my name was a complete mystery.

My first suspicion was of some ingenious plot. I am, I must admit, somewhat distrustful of the distressed female, after the queer stories I had heard from men-about-town.

But my strange visitor was already upon the mat, and I could hardly push her forth.

"Quick!" she implored; "close the door! Perhaps they may not have seen me!"

"They!—who?" I managed to stammer.

But she had already slipped inside, and behind the door in terror, lest she should be observed by any one outside in the foggy street.

I was too confused at that moment to know what I did.

The suddenness of it all held me amazed, and I stood regarding her in blank amazement.

She wore a smart, close-fitting hat of black velvet, and her long fur coat was open. Her gown, of some soft clinging material of a pale delicate shade of grey, suited her admirably, and at a glance I recognised that it was the creation of no ordinary dressmaker. Her extreme simplicity imparted to her a *cachet* that was entirely distinctive. Her hat was relieved with a dash of bright blue, a new shade that I had never before seen, while at her throat was a soft little collar of embroidered lawn which gave her an appearance of extreme neatness.

After I had closed the door our eyes met, but only for a single second, for she instantly lowered hers, stammering an apology.

But in that brief moment I realised how perfect was her beauty. In her glance there was no trace of *coquetterie*. She was modest, even shy, for she had sought me in a moment of abject terror, and now

stood there, panting and confused. It was as though she had been the object of considerable homage, and had already grown distrustful of it.

With the door closed the colour had come into her soft cheeks, and the mouth, which was a little wide, relaxed, the parted lips showing her white teeth.

I judged her to be scarcely twenty. Her hair was of that rare bronze tint, her large violet eyes gave me the impression of depth and clearness, while her complexion was fresh and delicate, her dimpled cheeks perfect in their contour, a straight, well-formed nose, a pointed chin, and a broad white brow that denoted a high intelligence. Her figure was supple and straight, while about her was an air of calm self-possession and a natural distinction of manner.

Her countenance possessed a soft sweetness that was peculiarly attractive, and that she was vivacious and light-hearted was plain from the smile that came so readily to her lips and was so loath to leave them. From the crown of her little velvet hat to the tip of her neat shoe she was dressed in perfect taste, while of her extraordinary good looks there could surely be no two opinions.

In brief, her beauty was exquisite. Hers was a face that would have made a sensation anywhere.

And she had suddenly come into my life from nowhere.

Her speech, soft and musical, possessed, I thought, just the slightest trace of a foreign accent, so slight, indeed, as to be hardly noticeable. Yet her natural

grace, her perfect taste in dress, and her extreme neatness—chic it would have been in one older—were rather that of the Parisienne than of the London girl.

"What is the matter?" I asked at last. "What has happened?"

"Happened?" she echoed, and there appeared in her beautiful eyes a strangely wild, haunted look—an expression of terror.

It was as though my question had recalled to her something horrible that, in the first moments of our meeting, she had forgotten.

"Ah," she implored, putting forth her white ungloved hand, "have mercy upon me, Dr. Vesey; have pity—I——"

And she broke off suddenly and raised her haunted eyes to mine.

I saw in them an honest, beseeching expression—a look that could not be feigned. My unexpected visitor was in evident distress, therefore, I invited her into my den, and seated her in my arm-chair.

She was trembling in every limb, and so excited that she could scarcely speak, and so I suggested that she should sit there for a while and recover.

"I—I shall be all right presently," she assured me. "Forgive me. I—I know that I had no right to come here and trouble you—only—only—I——"

Her breath came and went in short, quick gasps, and her hand was again upon her breast, as though to still the wild throbbing of her troubled heart.

Hardly had the disjointed sentences fallen from her mouth when I suddenly saw that the soft lace upon her right cuff was stained crimson with fresh blood! It was beneath her wrist, so that she apparently had not noticed it.

I was about to remark it, but I hesitated. I could see no scratch upon her white, ungloved hand to account for the stain, so I decided to give her an opportunity of an explanation.

Her breathless anxiety, nay, her haunting terror, was in itself curious.

Again—why had she sought me?

"Rest and calm yourself," I said at last, rising and obtaining a bottle of smelling-salts from the mantel-shelf, for which she smiled sadly as she thanked me.

CHAPTER II

"I AM CALLED XENIA"

FOR a few moments my mysterious visitor sat pale-faced, staring straight before her into the fire, then with palpable effort, she conquered her agitation, and my question as to how she had been aware of my name seemed to recall her to a sense of her surroundings.

"Ah," she replied, stirring uneasily and smiling, "that's a secret."

"One you certainly might tell me," I said in protest. "Where have you come from? What induced you to come here? Have you come from the house of a near neighbour?"

She started, a curious hardness showed at the corners of her mouth, and her countenance blanched.

"The—the fact is, Dr. Vesey," she blurted forth at last, "I am in very sore need of a friend—some one whom I may entrust with—with my secret, nay, with my life!"

"Your life?" I echoed. "Is it threatened, then?"

"Ah," she said, "it is all a very strange story, one which, if I told you, you would never believe.

I have always heard that many stranger things happen in real life than are imagined in fiction, but I refused to believe it until—until this evening."

In her agitation her foreign accent was slightly more pronounced.

"What has happened?" I inquired.

But her breath came and went quickly. She lowered her gaze, and in a low, faltering voice replied—

"No. I—I can't tell you, Dr. Vesey."

"Can't?—why?"

She was silent. To her eyes that strange, haunted look returned, then, in a voice scarce above a whisper, she replied—

"Because—because I dare not."

"Is it so very serious, then?" I asked, much mystified by her admission.

And to this she nodded in the affirmative, her chin upon her chest, her eyes fixed straight before her.

Whence had she come? What actually had happened?

My suspicion that her distress was only feigned in order to gain entry to my home had quickly been allayed. Her terror was genuine—of that I had entertained no doubt from the first.

Yet was not that stain upon her lace in itself mysterious?

"I think you really ought to tell me something regarding what has occurred," I said, a little re-

proachfully. "You have asked me to hide you—why?"

"Because—because I am in peril—in deadly peril," she replied frankly. "I have come to you, though I know I have no claim to your protection, only—only I know you to be a man of honour, and I beseech you to stand my friend."

She looked me straight in the face as she spoke, and in her eyes I saw mirrored truth and honesty, even though they wore that strangely haunted expression.

"Willingly will I become your friend," I answered; "but you must tell me something of what has happened—or how can I assist you?"

"Ah, then you will help me!" she cried, much relieved. "I knew you would not refuse me. You will hide me here—keep me concealed here—in your house—and say nothing! Promise me," she urged imploringly.

Her suggestion was certainly a curious one, and would be difficult of accomplishment. I told her of Phelps and his wife.

"Ah, surely it would not be so difficult. They have not been long in your service. I could pass as a relative—a cousin, or something."

I smiled. I was wondering whether such excuse would be believed by the worthy pair.

"The intrusion of a pretty young girl into a bachelor's home is—well, to say the least—a breach of the *convenances*, is it not?" I asked.

"Intrusion?" she repeated, with a sigh. "Yes, I know. I am an intruder. I regret it, but it is of dire necessity."

"Pray pardon me," I hastened to say. "I ought not to have used that word. Let me assure you that if I can be of service to you, I will, to the best of my ability."

"Ah, you are, indeed, generous," she declared, again looking me full in the face. "We are strangers, it is true, and I have no right to appeal to you. But I—I am defenceless, and I place myself, my future, my life unreservedly in your hands—if—if the burden be not too great."

"Not at all," I assured her, for the mystery surrounding her had attracted me. Her beautiful countenance, the fairest and sweetest I had ever seen, remained sphinx-like. She was, I felt convinced, in possession of some strange and terrible secret.

"But do tell me," I went on, "to what lucky chance do I owe the pleasure of this visit?"

"Lucky chance?" she echoed hoarsely. "Ah, do not call it that! Rather call it an accursed circumstance."

"When you came in you expressed a hope that they had not seen you," I said. "To whom did you refer?"

"To—to my enemies."

"And they live in the near vicinity?" I asked.

But she did not reply. She was sitting again

rigid, staring straight before her. She seemed determined to tell me nothing. Perhaps, after all, I had been foolish in promising friendship to one of whom I was in absolute ignorance. Yet her beauty was incomparable, and her charm delightful.

"As you already know my name you will, at least, tell me yours!" I exclaimed.

"I am called Xenia."

"Xenia!—what a pretty name!—Xenia what?"

"Oh, call me Xenia Edmonds," she said, her face brightening with a mischievous laugh.

"But Edmonds is not your real name?"

"Surely it is as good as any other," she replied, having now, with confidence in my promise, become much calmer.

"But that is not exactly frankness, is it?" I remarked, with a touch of reproach.

"I've told you that my name is Xenia, and it is so. Xenia they call me." And she said this so decisively that it was beyond dispute.

"Well, how came you to seek me in this manner? You surely ought to tell me—if we are to be close friends."

"It was of dire necessity—as I have already explained," was her response, suddenly growing serious again. "If you really intend to stand my friend, please ask me no questions that arouse within me unpleasant recollections. In due time you shall know more. All I beg of you is to extend to me

your generosity, Dr. Vesey, and allow me to remain here in hiding."

"Why? For what reason are you so anxious to conceal yourself?"

"Because, in a short time—even now—there is certain to be a hue-and-cry raised for me. And then—then I shall trust in your word of honour. My—my life will be in your hands."

"Really, this is most extraordinary—most unusual," I declared, looking across at her. She was leaning back in the big chair, and from beneath the hem of her grey skirt peeped forth a neat patent-leather shoe, and a slim silk-stockinged ankle.

"I readily admit it. I have suddenly appeared in your home—sprung from nowhere—and your curiosity is but natural," she said, raising her splendid eyes to mine. "I have sought sanctuary here, and you have accorded it to me, therefore you have not only my heartfelt thanks, but you will receive the thanks of others—my friends."

"Do they live near?"

"No—far away."

"But whence did you come when you arrived at my door?"

She shrugged her well-formed shoulders with an air that was distinctly foreign, and her lips relaxed into that curious smile that was so extremely tantalising.

"Dr. Vesey," she said at last, "merely regard me as a poor unfortunate person who has craved your

aid. Do not trouble about the past, or of whom or what I am. You have promised to be my friend, and in return I will become yours. Some day you may require the aid of a person in whom you can repose confidence, and then you will be able to trust me as completely as I am trusting you at this moment."

"But you seem so mysterious," was my frank declaration, as I glanced at that tell-tale stain upon the lace.

"I know that. Yet it is of sheer necessity, I assure you. If I could—I mean, if I dared—I would tell you everything. But even if I did, you would never believe it."

"I should credit anything which you told me, Miss Xenia," I assured her.

"Then you believe in me?" she asked hastily, suddenly stirring herself.

"Certainly. Why should I doubt you?"

"Ah, there again you show yourself my friend!" she exclaimed, with a happy smile. "So I do beg of you for the present simply to regard me as a chance acquaintance, one who has heard of you, and in consequence has come to throw herself upon your charity. Of the past, or of what untoward circumstance has occurred, take no heed. Believe in me, as I believe in you. Promise me to do that," and she looked beseechingly into my eyes.

"It is a little difficult," I assured her.

"But you will promise, won't you? It will be so much easier," she declared.

And so, with her sweet, winning way, she extracted from me a promise I would not have given to another living soul.

I suppose we must have remained chatting for a full hour. At my invitation she had removed her hat, displaying her luxuriant gold-bronze hair, neatly but well-dressed and held with an artistic comb of tortoise-shell. And as she sat at her ease I did not fail to notice how she started at every sound, as though she had recently received a great shock. Her ears seemed ever strained to catch any sound from the foggy street.

"But if you are really going to be my guest," I said, "you will require some necessities. How shall we manage?"

"That is not very difficult. I have a dressing-case in the cloak-room at Charing Cross—if I could only get it. But I cannot go out, I—I dare not!"

"Then I'll go," I suggested. "My servants won't be home till eleven or so, therefore I can get there and back before their return."

So when she gave me the cloak-room ticket, I told her to make herself comfortable, and putting on my hat and coat, I went forth into the fog.

Of taxis there were none, the fog had now become far too dense, therefore I took the train by the Underground from High Street, duly obtained the dressing-bag, a rather large one, covered with

the regulation green waterproof cover, and returned with it by the same route.

Just before half-past nine I re-entered my house and found my mysterious visitor in the act of speaking to some one in a foreign tongue over the telephone. But the instant she heard me in the hall she placed down the receiver, and when I entered the room I found her seated with an illustrated paper.

With whom, I wondered, had she been communicating?

I, however, said nothing. Had I not given my promise not to ply her further with distasteful questions?

Therefore I handed her her bag, and showed her upstairs to the guest's room in the front of the house. In about twenty minutes she reappeared, having washed her hands and rearranged her hair, which had become somewhat tumbled by her hat.

I noticed that she had discovered the stain upon her lace, for she had soaked it out in water, and to a great extent removed it.

"I feel so much better now," she declared, with a bright smile, as she came lightly into the room. "It really is awfully good of you to make me so comfortable."

I told her I had intended dining at the club, therefore it would be necessary to investigate Mrs. Phelp's larder, so, descending together, we explored the kitchen.

Having found some cold ham and bread and butter, my visitor busied herself in spreading a cloth upon the end of the dining-room table, where we made an impromptu meal, laughing as we ate.

She seemed rather to enjoy the unusual situation. Her shyness had already left her, and now she seemed a most sociable and delightful companion.

A dozen times, by dint of careful questioning, did I seek to learn something more concerning her, but all to no avail. As regards herself she remained absolutely mute.

After our meal we went back into my den, where I lit a cigarette and sat chatting with her.

She was highly intelligent and well read. She knew French and Italian and quoted wisdom from the works of several of the German philosophers. She had travelled widely too, for one her age, yet try how I would, I could not decide her nationality.

I asked her, but all she would tell me was—

"You are quite right; I am only half English."

And she smiled mysteriously.

I was gazing across at her through the haze of cigarette-smoke and pondering, when we were suddenly startled by a loud peal from the front-door bell.

"What's that?" she whispered, as she rose from her chair.

"Nothing; only somebody at the door," I replied. "I'll go and see."

"Remember, Dr. Vesey," she gasped, pale and anxious, "no one is to know I am here—not a soul except your faithful old servants!" she exclaimed anxiously.

"Have no fear, Miss Xenia," was my response. "You will be quite safe here beneath my roof."

And I went along the hall and threw open the door, where I found a very tall, very lean, grey-faced man without overcoat or hat, who was evidently in a high state of excitement.

"I believe you are a medical man, sir, are you not?" he asked breathlessly, in a refined voice. "Dr. Crawford, lower down, is, unfortunately, out, so I've come to you."

"I am a doctor, it's true," I replied, "but at present I'm not in practice."

"But you will come, won't you?" he urged. "It is a case of great emergency. I beg of you to come."

"Where?"

"Only across the way yonder — at No. 168. There have been very strange doings there."

"Strange doings?" I gasped, staring at the man. "What do you mean?"

"I hardly know yet," was his hasty reply. "Only we want a doctor at once."

"Very well," I said. "I'll get my hat and follow you."

I returned immediately to my mysterious visitor in order to explain how I had been suddenly called out, when I found her standing erect, rigid, terrified,

leaning for support against my writing-table—blanched to the lips.

"Dr. Vesey," she whispered, in a hard, strained voice, "I have overheard that—that the discovery has been made! They have, unfortunately, called you. But you will say nothing—swear you will not. I beg of you," she implored, clutching at me wildly. "My—my life is entirely in your hands! You will not, I know, betray me!"

Much mystified by this sudden turn of events, I assured her that I should keep my promise, and return to her in a few moments.

Then, filled with eager curiosity, I went forth into the choking fog and crossed the road to the dark, gloomy house opposite—a house which that night had become a house of mystery, for what I found there held me amazed, appalled.

Truly there had been very strange doings in that dingy house opposite. And what I witnessed there was but the prelude to many astounding and stirring adventures.

CHAPTER III

A MYSTERY OF LONDON

On entering the house across the way I was met in the hall by the tall, lean man who had summoned me. A police constable in his cape stood with him, and as I came in from the fog, the latter said—

"Will you go upstairs, please, doctor? The inspector's up there."

Conducted by the lean man—whom I afterwards learnt was a neighbour—I ascended the thickly carpeted staircase and entered the drawing-room, a large, well-lit apartment, the white folding-doors of which stood open.

Several men were there, together with an inspector of police and an elderly woman in faded black coat and bonnet, apparently a servant.

When the lean man announced me, the mystified expression upon their faces gave place to one of eagerness, while the police official, coming forward, said—

"Will you step into the next room, doctor. He's there."

I obeyed, and on entering the back drawing-room —a prettily furnished apartment with white walls and upholstered in bright yellow brocade—I saw, lying prone upon the carpet, the form of a fair-complexioned young man of perhaps twenty-five, with closely cropped hair, and small, well-trained moustache.

Upon the pale blue carpet he was lying on his side, his stiff hands up to his throat, and his grey eyes wide open, his countenance ashen grey—that peculiar colour which death brings to the human face. He was in dark clothes of fashionable cut—his coat braided with broad lappels—while he wore a white piqué shirt and a cravat of the latest mode.

A single glance was sufficient to tell what had occurred. In the left side of the neck, just below the ear, was a small punctured wound, from which the blood had flowed, staining both his shirt and the carpet.

I bent quickly and made a rapid examination. He was quite dead, and had been so for a considerable time, for *rigor mortis* had already set in.

"We knew it, of course," remarked the inspector, when I pronounced life extinct, "only we wanted a doctor to see him. I sent for our divisional surgeon, but he's out."

"But what does this mean?" I asked, rising again, and looking around the room and at the small knot

of the curious who had by some means gained admission there.

"We hardly know as yet, sir. I'm expecting some of the plain-clothes men round from the station every minute. Perhaps they'll be able to make something of it. It isn't a case of suicide, do you think?"

"Certainly not," I declared emphatically, stooping to pick up a long, ivory paper-knife lying near.

But he prevented me, saying—

"Don't touch anything, please, sir. They may want to take finger-prints."

"Ah! I never thought of that," I said. "It's a case of murder, without a doubt."

"The most curious feature of the affair is that the victim is a complete stranger," the inspector said; then, addressing the wizened old woman in black, he said—

"That's so, isn't it? You've never seen him before?"

"Never, sir, in all my life," she declared. "Mrs. Kynaston, my mistress, is away in India, an' the 'ouse 'as been shut up these three months or more. She went away in the first week in September."

"And left you in charge—eh?" asked the inspector.

"Not to live 'ere. I 'ad orders to come in once a week an' give the place an airin', only the weather's been so very bad this last three weeks that I 'aven't been. I live up at Notting 'Ill, you see."

"And what happened this evening?" I asked eagerly.

"Well, sir, it was this way," explained the woman, whose dark eyes were full of fear, and who seemed greatly upset, "I was cook before Mrs. Kynaston left, an' lived in this 'ouse. I'd 'ad some difference with my 'usband and 'ad gone back into service. But just before the mistress left we made it up again, an' I've gone back to 'im. This afternoon, while doin' a bit of dressmakin', I recollected I 'ad a nice blouse length locked up in my box 'ere, so I came over to get it. But judge what a surprise I got when I found the electric light full on in the 'all and dinin'-room. I thought Mrs. Kynaston 'ad come back, yet she surely wouldn't without lettin' me know to get the 'ouse cleaned ready. I opened the front-door with my key, and on goin' into the dinin'-room I saw, in a moment, that something was wrong. So I ran out down into the High Street, and told a perliceman. I thought burglars 'ad got in, and because I shouted 'Thieves!' a lot o' people came, an' about 'alf a dozen of us went into the 'ouse to search—an' we found this poor young man. That's all."

"You saw nobody?" asked the inspector.

"Nobody at all, sir. An' I've never set eyes on this young man before!"

"Curious!" I exclaimed, yet I was wondering whether I had not already discovered a key to the strange incident which had occurred to me earlier in the evening.

The fact that the mysterious Xenia had implored me to preserve silence was assuredly plain proof of it.

The unknown young man lying there had most certainly been the victim of foul play.

"We've already examined the front-door," the inspector explained to me. "It has not been forced. The intruders, whoever they were, must have entered with a duplicate key."

"But why? What could have been their business here?" I queried.

"Ah, that we can't at present tell, doctor," he replied, gazing upon the dead white face.

Again I bent and made further examination of the body.

The dead man was certainly refined, and, judging from his slim, well-shaped hands, had never done manual labour. His teeth were good, but one in the upper jaw on the right side had, I noticed, been replaced by a gold one. Upon the little finger of his white left hand was an antique gold signet-ring with a crest upon it—a flying swallow. This, my knowledge of heraldry told me, was that of the Arundel family—in French *hirondelle*—a fact which I pointed out to the inspector.

"I've been through his pockets, sir," the officer said. "There's nothing in them except money—eleven pounds odd, a few French francs, and an old gold coin—nothing to give us a clue to his identity."

"But when you entered the dining-room, what

caused you to suspect anything was wrong—beyond the fact that the electric light was on?" I asked the woman, who had told us her name was Orrock.

"Well, sir, you'd better go down and see," was her reply. "Perhaps the inspector'll take you down."

"I'll go presently," I said, and then proceeded to make a tour of that inner room wherein lay the unknown victim.

The house seemed almost a replica of my own, but, of course, furnished more modernly, and with greater taste.

Mrs. Kynaston, we were informed, was a young woman, wife of a stock broker, who, left a widow a year ago, had gone to India to visit her sister, who was married to an Army officer in Cawnpore. During her husband's life they had kept a great deal of company, but since his death she had hardly lived there a month altogether.

The room in which I stood had evidently been her boudoir, for there were traces of the artistic feminine hand everywhere. The place was somewhat dusty, yet I did not fail to notice that considerable luxury was displayed everywhere. The woman Orrock had been in the service of the Kynastons ever since their marriage, and, it appeared, also knew my deceased aunt, Mrs. Vesey, very well by sight.

I examined the small inlaid escritoire, and other objects of furniture, but dared not touch them,

because I might stultify the investigations of the detectives. Yet, as I stood beside the body and noted the manner in which he had fallen, it appeared to me that after entering that room he had been struck from behind by some one lying in concealment behind the heavy *portière* curtain of old-rose velvet which, drawn aside now that the folding doors were open, would offer ample concealment for a secret assassin.

I, however, expressed no opinion, for I intended to hear the theory of the detectives.

We had not long to wait for their arrival—three plain-clothes men from the station next to St. Mary Abbott's Church.

And while they were busy with their investigation I was afforded an opportunity of further questioning Mrs. Orrock—all the onlookers, save the lean man, having been ordered out of the adjoining room.

"The whole affair is a complete mystery, sir," declared the wizened old woman. "On every 'and I see traces of somebody who's been a livin' 'ere for some time. I ain't been 'ere these three weeks, an' they may 'ave been in 'ere all that time. I shouldn't wonder! But who are they? An' who killed the poor young man? 'E's been murdered 'ere this evenin', you think, sir?"

"Undoubtedly—a few hours ago. The murderer evidently searched his pockets and removed everything by which he might be identified. It is a mystery—a very remarkable affair, indeed," I said.

"The constable who's been on duty here this week has just told me that he's seen this house lit up on several evenings," remarked the inspector, who was standing by. "Naturally, he thought that the lady had returned."

"The constable I saw downstairs—eh?"

"Yes, doctor."

"He never saw any one enter or leave?"

"He don't remember seeing anybody."

The detectives were busy examining the room, therefore I took another glance at the ashen face of the mysterious dead one. His mouth was half-open, his lips protruded, and both hands were raised to his throat, while in his eyes was a strange amazed look, as though he were still alive—an extraordinary expression that I had never before seen in the eyes of the dead. It seemed as if his gaze had at the very moment of his death fallen upon something so startling, so horrifying that it held him fascinated and transfixed.

What, I wondered, was the actual truth?

I followed Mrs. Orrock down the broad, thick-carpeted stairs, and entered the dining-room, a large apartment, heavy with fog, where I found the table laid, fresh chrysanthemums being in the big silver epergne in the centre. Around the pink silk centre-piece had been trailed some greenery, while the silver and glass gave the whole a most artistic and pretty effect.

Three persons had partaken of a cold meal,

judging from the remains upon the dessert-plates. A place had been laid for a fourth, but it had not been occupied. The serviette remained there still unfolded, and the roll of bread untouched.

Upon the dessert-dishes were piled some black hothouse grapes, and a few pears and bananas, while on the table stood an unfinished bottle of a good brand of champagne, together with a decanter half-filled with port.

That the trio who had dined there had received some sudden shock was shown by the fact that one of the chairs occupied had been overturned by the sudden rising of its occupant, while neither of the three glasses had been emptied.

Two of the serviettes lay upon the floor, which led to the supposition that the trio rose hastily, without being afforded time to conclude their meal. They had been alarmed. By whom?

Some one might have rung the front-door bell, causing the intruders consternation, or terrifying them.

"I've been down in the kitchen, sir. It's in an awful state," declared the woman at my side. "They don't seem to 'ave cooked very much, but they've dirted a 'ost of plates and dishes."

"Then the mysterious persons took possession of the place!" I cried. "Did they sleep here?"

"No, sir. I've just 'ad a glance around the 'ouse, but I don't see a sign of any of the beds bein' slept in."

There had been a fire in the grate, but it was now out. Among the dead cinders, however, I suddenly detected a tiny ball of paper, thrown there carelessly. Picking it up I saw that it was a telegram addressed to Mrs. Kynaston at that house, and had been dispatched from the West Strand telegraph office at 4.49 that afternoon. It said: "Be with you at five."

Strange that it was addressed to Mrs. Kynaston—the lady who was certainly abroad.

"I can't get over their boldness—a livin' 'ere an' a lightin' up the place an' makin' themselves at 'ome' when I might come in at any moment!" exclaimed Mrs. Orrock. "I only wish we knew who they were."

"The police will find that out, never fear," I replied. "This telegram may tell us something. You see it's addressed to your mistress."

"To my mistress?" exclaimed the woman. "Why, they must have 'ad the cheek to take in the telegram an' open it!"

Unless, I thought, one of those mysterious intruders had passed under the name of Kynaston.

CHAPTER IV

A FURTHER ENIGMA

A TOUR of the well-furnished room showed that dust lay thickly everywhere. It sadly needed cleaning. Whoever had taken up their temporary abode there was not over-particular as regards cleanliness. That they had intruded there, and falsely represented themselves as the occupiers of the house was certain. Yet with what motive, except for the commission of a crime, terrible evidence of which was apparent in that room upstairs.

Out in the hall I could hear the heavy tread of policemen and gruff voices in conversation. By very careful scrutiny of the three plates I came to the conclusion that the persons who had eaten a meal there were two men and a woman. This theory I formed because upon one of the plates a pear had been peeled thinly and carefully, and the pretty cut-glass finger-bowl had been used. In addition, I found lying upon the floor, close beside the chair, a thin, crinkled hairpin.

I had just picked it up when a constable entered and informed me that the detectives were desirous

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of seeing me upstairs, therefore I ascended to the back drawing-room, where lay the body of the victim —the white, ghastly face with those wide-open, staring eyes.

My gaze fell upon them and I felt a thrill of horror. They seemed to regard me in strange fascination, as though beneath a spell. As a medical man I had encountered death in many forms, but never had I witnessed in the eyes of a lifeless person such a curiously mystified, entranced expression.

"You are absolutely certain that this cannot be a case of suicide, doctor?" asked the elder of the three detectives, who was apparently the one in authority.

"Absolutely certain," was my reply. "The blow was struck from behind, as he entered this room—a single blow, which proved fatal."

"Have you any theory as to the weapon which might have been used?"

"Certainly. If you notice the shape of the wound," I said, bending down to the prostrate man, and pointing to the spot beneath the ear, "you will see that it is triangular, about a quarter of an inch each way. Now, to me, that conveys a good deal. Such a wound could only have been inflicted by a knife with a triangular blade. What knives have triangular blades? I have seen in pocket-knives small triangular blades for piercing cigars; but they would be too small. No. The weapon used here was, I believe, one of those ancient Florentine

daggers known as *misericordias*, very thin and razor-edged. Wounds from them, because of their shape, were very difficult to heal, and often the blades were smeared with some substance which, providing the wound was not immediately fatal, would set up blood-poisoning."

"That's most interesting," declared the police officer. "You really ought to have been a detective, doctor."

I laughed, saying—

"Well, I merely give you my theory, a result of my observations. The young man was undoubtedly killed by some person who lay in concealment behind those curtains. The blow was struck, too, with unerring precision."

"Then the assassin was a foreigner, you think?"

"Not necessarily so. The knife used may have been from some museum. They are not manufactured in Italy nowadays."

"Well, it is a very remarkable mystery," declared the detective. "It seems very much as though this young fellow has been enticed here to meet his death."

"Exactly my opinion," I responded. "The whole conspiracy has, it seems, been carried out with most extraordinary boldness, and, no doubt, with great cunning."

Hardly had I finished speaking when Blythe, the police divisional surgeon, entered. A tall, grey-bearded man, he lived in Earl's Court Road and had

a large practice. I had met him once before, therefore we shook hands.

"I'm glad you've come," I said. "I'll retire from this. They sent across for me because you were out. But I'm not in practice just now, as you know."

"But, my dear fellow, I don't wish you to retire from the affair at all," declared Blythe, who was perhaps the most popular doctor in Kensington.

"But I wish to," I said. "I don't want to appear at the inquest, for I'm going away."

He did his best to persuade me to retain my position in the inquiry, but finding that I declined, he bent and made a rapid examination of the body.

"A pretty bad wound, Vesey," he declared, looking up at me—"a pretty bad one. Couldn't have been self-inflicted. Murder, without a doubt. Isn't that your conclusion?"

I nodded in the affirmative, and then stood by listening to his conversation with the detectives.

When they explained to him the mysterious circumstances he was as amazed as I had been.

"Most remarkable!" he declared. "What do you think of it, Vesey? I know Mrs. Kynaston well. She's a patient of mine, and is now in India. This poor fellow has fallen a victim of some dastardly plot, without a doubt. The assassin and his accomplices must have discovered that this house was left unattended and settled themselves here."

"Exactly," I said. "And what's more, they dined here this evening. Look in the dining-room and you'll see."

Blythe stroked his short grey beard thoughtfully as he gazed at the dead man's face.

"What a very strange look in the poor fellow's eyes!" he exclaimed, addressing me. "I've never seen such an expression as that in all my experience. Looks as though at the last moment of his life his gaze encountered something which held him fascinated. Really, inspector, those eyes haunt one. Cover his face—with that silk antimacassar over yonder on the couch."

And the inspector obeyed.

"What a terrible look, Vesey!" exclaimed my friend, turning again to me. "It's as though, after he was struck down, he was startled and fascinated at the same moment. The very expression of those sightless eyes is in itself a profound mystery."

"A mystery which, it is hoped, the police will solve," I said.

I had made no mention of the telegram reposing in my pocket. For reasons of my own I had decided to get it translated. It might bring to me further knowledge.

What would the police have said had they been aware of the strange incident which had occurred at my own house—or of my mysterious visitor now in my rooms so anxiously awaiting my return?

A woman's hand had arranged the flowers upon that

dinner-table. A woman had dined there—partaken of a cold dinner, most probably, for it was not clear how much work had been done in the kitchen. Was that woman my mysterious yet charming little friend Xenia—the girl who called herself Edmonds?

The detectives had descended to the dining-room to see the remains of the repast, and I found myself left there alone with Blythe.

"Do you know, Vesey, I feel already that this is a most interesting case," he said. "Of course, as divisional surgeon, I see a lot of the seamy side of things, but in this I find more mystery than I've ever encountered before."

"Yes," I said, scarce knowing what I replied. I was bewildered by the strangeness of the situation.

"The whole affair is a complete enigma," Blythe went on, in his quick, impetuous way. "These intruders were no ordinary persons."

"I agree," I said. "From what I've seen and heard here I feel that the consummation of some carefully planned plot has been effected. But before we can ascertain what has happened to this poor unfortunate fellow, we must first discover who he was."

"Which will certainly be difficult," declared my friend, gazing reflectively upon the inanimate form, whose covered face gave it a weird appearance. The delicate but stiff hands were still at the throat, and the ugly stain showed vividly upon the soft, pleated, evening shirt-front.

"The police will discover something," I said with confidence.

"They will, of course, allege things," replied my friend, in a low, confidential tone, words which were not overheard. "As far as they've gone at present there is no clue—nor will there be. Depend upon it, the person who struck this blow was an expert. And as such, it is not likely he will be caught napping."

"You think, then, that the assassin was a man—eh?"

"Yes. A woman doesn't use a knife."

"A curious wound."

"Yes—unerring and fatal. He probably did not utter a cry—couldn't—was choked."

"Distinguished-looking—don't you think so?"

"Very—but a foreigner, without a doubt. I wonder——" And next instant he bent to the body and turning down the collar of his coat revealed a label sewn upon the lining. I glanced eagerly at it and saw that the coat was made by Duchatel, in the Rue Auber, in Paris, a smart shop I knew quite well at the side of the Opera.

"From this," I said, "the police will certainly be able to identify him."

Blythe was a trifle dubious.

"They may, of course," he said, "and they may not." Then, bending and examining it more closely, he exclaimed, "If I'm not mistaken, the label has been taken from another coat and sewn in here. Look at the stitches—they are not those of a tailor. See how large and uneven they are!"

I looked, and was compelled to admit that his theory was correct.

"He stitched in that label with one object—to escape identity, and yet he has fallen a victim! Even this one single fact adds complications. He did not anticipate death when he entered here—that is very certain."

"But why, do you think, should he wish it to be known that his tailor was Duchatel?" I asked with curiosity.

"He had some distinct object, without a doubt. He himself may have contemplated a crime — or perhaps suicide," said Blythe. "In any case, he intended to puzzle the police."

"Well, they are puzzled enough—in all conscience," I said.

"And there's a woman at the bottom of the affair, without a doubt—there always is in mysteries such as these."

"You speak as though you were a detective."

"Well, I've been a police-surgeon a good many years, my dear Vesey, and I have learnt to note facts, and to form theories," replied my friend, glancing around the room. "Yet I must admit that this is by far the strangest case which I have ever known. Millman, the detective-inspector, has just told me that the whole matter is a complete enigma."

Recollections of the unexpected appearance of my little friend Xenia arose within me, and I stood pondering, without replying.

"Hulloa! What's that?" he exclaimed next moment, as he bent to the floor. He had trodden upon something, which he picked up and held in the centre of his palm.

It was a tiny bead of very pale pink coral.

I glanced across the room, and for the first time saw some others upon the carpet, while beneath a chair lay a broken necklace with half the beads missing. The ornament had evidently broken and fallen off unnoticed.

"There," he cried, "I said that a woman had been here! Is not this sufficient evidence of it? We must point it out to Millman—a most important clue."

Who, I wondered, had dispatched that telegraphic message? I longed to seek an explanation, for I felt that in it would be found something which would give me a solution of the most mysterious affair.

True, the discovery of the broken necklace was interesting, but, after all, it conveyed nothing tangible.

The mystery of it all held me dumbfounded. Like you, my reader, I had read many strange mysteries of crime in the columns of the daily newspapers, but here was I an actor in one of the most curious that had ever puzzled the police of London.

I became seized by a desire to return to my mysterious little friend. Phelps might return, and her presence there would certainly arouse wonder.

So, excusing myself to Blythe, and promising to return presently, I descended the steps into the fog, and after crossing the road, and groping my way along the railings, ascended the steps of my own house.

I had to feel my way with both hands. My iron-gate post had upon it a large ornament, in shape like an acorn, and by this I knew that I was in my own front garden.

So dense had the fog now become that no ray of light reached the spot from the street-lamp, which only showed a dull grey blur.

I opened the door with my latchkey and entered.

Next second, however, I drew back with a cry.

A single glance showed me that something had happened in my absence—something unexpected, terrible, inexplicable.

I stood there, rooted to the spot.

CHAPTER V

"DO NOT FORGET THE NAME"

To my shouts came no reply. Phelps had apparently not returned.

Inside the wide, old-fashioned hall, at the foot of the staircase, lay the huddled figure of a man—a complete stranger. He was lying upon his side, head and knees together, apparently just as he had fallen. He wore an overcoat of dark brown melton cloth, while his felt hat lay near.

As I bent to him in breathless wonder I judged him to be about thirty-five, his features refined, his hair brown, and with a short, dark, well-trimmed beard which gave him a foreign appearance. In the lining of his hat was the name of a hatter in the Corso in Rome, therefore I took him to be an Italian.

How he had come there, in my house, or what had occurred, were equally mysterious.

At first I thought him only unconscious, but a few minutes later, when I came to examine him, I found, to my horror, that life was extinct. The man was dead.

Had he fallen downstairs and broken his neck?

Such was my surmise, as I could find no external injury. But quickly I dispelled that theory, and straightening myself, I stood gazing upon the lifeless form in utter bewilderment.

Where was the mysterious Xenia?

I rushed upstairs to the guest-chamber. The light was on and the door wide open, but she was not there. I dashed frantically from room to room, seeking sign of her, but found none. As far as I could see, the house was as I had left it three-quarters of an hour before, but my fair visitor had left, carrying her dressing-case with her.

She had left me without a word!

The advent of the stranger—now dead—was, no doubt, the cause of her hurried departure. She had apparently been in greater fear of the man lying there lifeless, than she had been of detection.

Curious, to say the least.

Again I turned my attention to the lifeless form of the unknown. The features were in no way distorted by death. Indeed, there was the calm relaxed expression of sleep, though at the corners of the mouth I detected just the slightest trace of blood. I opened the mouth, suspecting poison, yet I could find nothing whatever to presuppose such theory.

No, death seemed due to some injury, but its nature I was unable to determine.

To rush across and inform the police of my remarkable discovery was my first thought; never-

theless, on reflection, I recollected my promise to my fair visitor. The mystery of it all entranced me. I was held bewildered. If I crossed to the house opposite and told them the extraordinary story of a dead man being found in my house, it would surely need explanation. A lame story would never be believed. The situation had, indeed, now become an extremely serious one. The question would naturally be asked—How did the intruder gain admission if no one were at home? Some one must have let him in.

Suddenly a suggestion crossed my mind. I had a spare latchkey. If that were found upon him, then the manner of his entry would be explained. And yet I had no desire for the publicity which the Press would give the affair, and the consequent attention of reporters and press-photographers. How strange the world is! Life is a mystery existing on miracles.

On the other hand, I reflected, I, as a medical man, could make a post-mortem, and, if satisfied that he had died a natural death, could give a medical certificate which the registrar and undertaker would accept. The dead unknown could be buried under some name I could easily bestow upon him, and nobody need be any the wiser—nobody save Miss Xenia Edmonds. This latter suggestion appealed to me as the easiest solution of the difficulty. To Phelps I could represent that the dead man was a friend who called unexpectedly to consult me, and

who expired suddenly. He would preserve the secret, of that I felt assured.

But if I discovered that the man's death was due to foul play—what then? I should either have to give a false certificate, or else confess to the authorities. In either case I would lay myself open to a prosecution.

Again I bent beside the prostrate body and felt the pockets. In a plain gold cigarette-case were half a dozen Egyptian cigarettes, together with a five-pound Bank of England note. His watch was a gold half-hunter, while in his trousers-pockets I found about four pounds in gold and silver and a pearl-handled penknife. In the breast-pocket of his jacket was a man's visiting-card bearing the name "Enrico Spinola," together with a piece of notepaper of the Hotel Ritz folded in half and bearing an address written in an angular feminine hand, that of a foreigner, without a doubt.

In eagerness I read it, and, to my amazement, found that the address was my own! My name was spelt "Vesei," but the address was quite right.

For what reason had it been furnished to him? And by whom?

I stood in indecision. I knew not how to act. The name upon the visiting-card was, of course, Italian, but I was half inclined to doubt whether it were his own.

The thought occurred to me that he might, by some means, have discovered the presence of my fair

visitor, and having watched me out had come to the house with evil intent, whereupon she had seized her belongings and fled.

If such were a fact, then her pursuer's lips being sealed by death there surely could be no harm in giving information to the police.

The mystery of it all was utterly beyond solution. Even though I called in the police I should not break the pledge I had so foolishly given to the mysterious Xenia.

Ah me! What strange promises can be extracted from a man by a pretty woman.

I walked through into my den, where the fire had now burned low. The green cushion in the arm-chair was still tumbled where my fair visitor had sat, and, as I entered, my gaze fell upon the blotting-pad upon my writing-table. A sheet of paper lay there with words hurriedly scrawled in pencil. It was a message—a farewell message for me. It ran:—

"Forgive me for leaving so abruptly. I am compelled. As soon as I am able I will communicate with you. My heartfelt thanks for the very generous assistance and protection you have given me to-night. Good-bye for the present.

"X."

Her promise to communicate with me was somewhat reassuring. If the man lying dead had been the victim of foul play, then she surely would not have left that message. Indeed, the fact of her

having written it showed that she had not been in so great a hurry as I had believed.

She promised to meet me again — and then I hoped for an explanation.

I was filled with eager curiosity as to what had happened in my absence.

Why had the dead foreigner been given my address?

I took the spare latchkey from the drawer in the writing-table and presently placed it in the vest-pocket of the dead man. Then, with a final look at his calm features, I turned again and left the house.

Across the way I found the detectives still busy. Inspector Millman, who was in the dining-room, I called out into the hall, and in a few brief words told him of my discovery.

He stood before me astounded.

"Well, doctor," he cried, "two mysteries in one street on the same evening are surely unusual! Is the man an absolute stranger?"

"I've never seen him before in my life."

As I spoke I noticed upon the tiled floor of the hall a half-consumed cigarette, and, stooping, picked it up and examined it, finding it to be marked as the same brand as those in the gold case in the pocket of the dead unknown.

I, however, made no remark.

"Hulloa!" cried the inspector, "what have you found there?"

In response I handed it to him without a word.

He examined it beneath the light, noted the brand, and then tossed it away, saying—

"I fear that won't tell us very much."

Then, calling two of his men, he groped his way across the dark road after me, and I let myself in with my key.

Phelps and his wife were still absent, fogbound, I presumed.

As soon as the three police officials caught sight of the dead man they uttered exclamations of surprise.

"Well, this is an absolute mystery," declared Millman, after he had glanced at the white, lifeless countenance. "How did he get in, if no one was at home?"

In answer, one of the men, who was already engaged in searching the dead man's pockets, produced the latchkey.

"That's strange!" remarked the inspector. "Does it fit the front door?"

It was immediately tried, and pronounced to fit perfectly.

"Well, doctor," he said, turning to me; "it almost seems as though he came here for the purpose of committing a theft."

"Yes," I said.

But a moment later, when the slip of paper bearing my name and address was discovered, all three exchanged glances of utter astonishment.

"There's more mystery here than is apparent," declared the inspector. "This man evidently knew you, doctor."

"He may have done," I said. "But as far as I'm aware I've never set eyes upon him before."

"I wonder," exclaimed the detective, much puzzled, "whether this affair has any connection with the crime across the way?"

"Who knows?" I said. "It is certainly most remarkable why this man should have entered in my absence."

"He's a foreigner, without a doubt," declared the officer. "Another of those undesirable aliens. The dead man over the road is a foreigner also. What's your opinion, doctor? How was this man killed?"

"I can find nothing to account for death," was my reply. "I can discover no wound. We had better call Dr. Blythe across."

One of the men went forth into the dense fog to fetch the divisional surgeon, who, on arrival a few moments later, was equally astounded at the discovery.

Together we made a close examination of the body, but found absolutely nothing to account for death.

"There must be a post-mortem, Vesey," declared Blythe. "You'll help me to make it at the mortuary. Curious that he should watch you out, and enter here with a latchkey."

"He may have been a friend of your late aunt," suggested the inspector, to whom I had explained how I had come to reside in Argyll Road.

"But why had he Dr. Vesey's name written down in his pocket?" queried Blythe fussily.

"Yes, it's curious—distinctly curious," declared the detective. "I feel certain the one affair is connected with the other. But in what manner we have yet to ascertain."

After further consultation and discussion, lasting perhaps half an hour, a police ambulance was brought with difficulty through the fog and the body of the dead unknown carried out of the house and conveyed to the Kensington mortuary.

Then Blythe and the police officers returned to the house of mystery across the way, leaving me again alone to ponder over the very strange happenings of that most memorable evening.

Phelps had not returned. Indeed, I did not expect him, for the fog had now become denser than I had ever known it.

I had passed into the old-fashioned dining-room with some letters I had found in the letter-box, when suddenly the telephone-bell startled me.

Passing into my own den, I took up the receiver and answered—

"Hulloa?"

"Hulloa?" asked a man's deep voice. Then, in Italian, the same voice said, "It's all right. At the Danieli on the twenty-fourth, don't forget the

name Gallini, but don't approach me till I give you the word. It's all right, I suppose?"

"*Si*," I replied, using the Italian affirmative.

Then I listened further, but the mysterious speaker had rung off, leaving me in wonder as to who it could be.

The message was certainly not meant for me, but for the unknown intruder who had so mysteriously met with his death on entering my house.

Or was it a message intended for the mysterious Xenia—the woman who had fled in fear?

CHAPTER VI

PURSUIT OF THE TRUTH

THE Danieli! It suddenly occurred to me that it was the name of a well-known hotel in Venice. I had once stayed there. It was situated close to that sentimental fraud so much photographed by tourists, the Bridge of Sighs.

The Danieli! And the mysterious speaker over the telephone would be there on the twenty-fourth, in the name of Gallini. So much I knew. Should I attempt to profit by this knowledge?

That the man was in fear of detection was plain by the manner he had urged that he should not be approached. In fear of what?

I recollected the Hotel Danieli, crowded as it had been in May by British and American tourists, who took gondolas up and down the canals, fed the pigeons in St. Mark's Square, and were photographed while so doing, and went to the "serenata" of an evening.

Was it possible that the message was intended for my fair visitor? Was she going there?

I rang up the telephone exchange, and after a

good deal of inquiry learnt that my mysterious call had come from the public call-box at the Tube Station at the corner of Queen's Road, Bayswater; more I could not ascertain.

Next day the papers were full of the affair. Argyll Road, usually so quiet and select, swarmed with eager reporters and busy photographers. All the morning, Phelps, who returned soon after eight, was kept busy answering the door to inquisitive representatives of the Press, to whom he gave the same reply—that I was not at home. But they were not to be put off by such a response, and knots of them lounged up and down the road and at the corner of the High Street awaiting my appearance in order to interview me.

A murder mystery is such good copy for the papers, and promises so many good "stories," that the instant one occurs the whole machinery of every office of the enterprising journals is at once set in operation, with the result that every one who happens to have been in any way connected with the unusual occurrence has a particularly busy time of it.

I found it so myself, being compelled to call a taxi by telephone, and escape in it, not, however, before I had been snapshotted while coming down my front-door steps and button-holed by two representatives of the evening papers.

Later that afternoon, however, accompanied by Millman and two officers from Scotland Yard, I visited the house opposite, and was present while

they made a very careful and close investigation of the place.

The neighbours on either hand had been questioned. Two servants in the adjoining house on the right declared that on several occasions during the past week taxis had pulled up before Mrs. Kynaston's, and people had entered and left.

The two girls, who slept on the top floor in the front, had declared that at about a quarter to two o'clock one morning, several days before, a taxi drove up, and they heard voices. They got up, and looking out of the window, saw the figures of two men in evening-dress ascend the steps and enter the house next door.

Indeed, they believed Mrs. Kynaston had returned, and therefore took no notice of any persons who came and went.

From the house on the other side a curious story had been obtained. The occupier was a City merchant, and one night, on returning late from a dinner of the Drapers' Company, he walked home from High Street Station. As he approached his house he was surprised to notice a woman emerge from Mrs. Kynaston's house and walk in his direction. As she passed he saw that she was young, dark-haired, and wearing a long sealskin coat and fur toque.

He mentioned it to his wife, who, however, remarked that she had seen visitors, therefore Mrs. Kynaston had evidently returned.

All the information gleaned went to show that the intruders had occupied the place for a week or more in such an open manner as to disdain suspicion. And yet the police could obtain no tangible description of any one who had been seen to visit there—nothing, indeed, sufficient to identify them.

Half the people living in Argyll Road seemed ready to come forward with statements that they had seen persons entering or leaving No. 168, and yet nobody could closely describe any of the callers.

"The victim was entrapped here, without a doubt," declared one of the detectives. "What the bait was, we've yet to discover. One thing is quite certain, that there was a woman in the case. Myself, I've strong suspicion that these premises were taken possession of by a gang of card-sharpers. They may have fleeced the young man, and then, fearing lest he might make matters uncomfortable, they killed him. It wouldn't be the first time that trick has been done, you know."

"That may be," I agreed, "yet there are no signs of cards."

"Yes, there are," he replied, and produced three packs of poker-card of American manufacture, adding, "We found these in a cabinet in the drawing-room this morning."

Further than that the police could not proceed.

That evening, at the Kensington mortuary, I assisted Blythe in making post-mortem examinations of both men.

Such work in the cold chilliness of the mortuary chamber is never pleasant, therefore I spare the readers any description of our investigations.

In the case of the fair young man found at No. 168, our conclusions were quickly arrived at. Death was due to a blow struck just below the ear by some triangular-bladed instrument. It had severed the artery and penetrated the thyroid cartilage and the larynx—a deep, downward blow, delivered, no doubt, from behind.

As regards the mysterious intruder I had found at the foot of my own stairs, the investigation was more difficult. The brain revealed nothing, being in its normal state, but presently, on opening the thorax, it was revealed that death had occurred from purely natural causes—an aneurism of the heart.

The intruder had certainly not met his death by violence, but, on entering the hall, had apparently been stricken down by a natural affliction, and struggling to the foot of the stairs had expired.

In that weird, chilly mortuary chamber I stood in silence, reconstructing in imagination what had happened in my house during my absence.

Hearing a ring at the bell, and believing it to be myself, Xenia had opened it, to discover some one whom she held in terror. The shock was mutual. Upon the man with his weak heart it seemed to have had a fatal effect.

She saw him fall, and then, rushing to my study,

had written me that curious message of farewell. Afterwards she had dashed upstairs, put on her hat and coat, seized her dressing-case, and left the house in a wild frenzy of terror.

"It is certainly curious," remarked my colleague, standing by and looking upon the dead man. "I strongly suspected foul play. After all, his death may not have been connected with the tragedy opposite. He may have been some intimate friend, or perhaps a distant relation of your late aunt."

"He may have been," I responded mechanically.

"No doubt he came from abroad. That he entered with a latchkey betrays either an intimate acquaintance with the household, or he went there with some evil design."

"That had better be left to the police," I said.

We had rearranged the body in its previous state, ready for interment, and had left the presence of the silent dead when Millman met us, inquiring eagerly the result of our investigation.

When Blythe told him, he exclaimed in surprise—

"Well, doctor, that makes the whole thing more mysterious than ever. Did he die from excitement, do you think?"

"He probably did."

"Then, as far as he is concerned, there is little for us to trouble about, except to calm the Press, who are trying to create a mystery where none exists," remarked the detective.

"The chief mystery to me is why the man

entered my house," I hastened to say. "Dr. Blythe has a theory that he might have been an intimate friend of my late aunt."

"That certainly may have been the case, Dr. Vesey," was the detective's reply as we stood together in the cold stone corridor where the single gas-jet hissed above us. "I had not thought of that."

"Well," I exclaimed, "the less we say about the matter before the coroner the better for me! The man was found dead in my house, and he died through a sudden and undue excitement. May we not attribute it to the fact that, after entering secretly, he heard a noise and feared detection?"

"Yes, Vesey, if you wish—if you wish," said Blythe. "I'll mention that suggestion to the coroner. The jury are certain to accept it."

And so we parted at the corner of Scarsdale Villas, and I walked back home to Argyll Road.

I sat alone in the old-fashioned dining-room eating my dinner as usual, Phelps, grey-faced and sedate, waiting upon me with that genteel silence which pervades the well-ordered household. The dark green carpet, the ugly, early Victorian furniture, the mahogany buffet, and the out-of-date style of everything in that room always jarred upon me. Our grandmothers delighted in darkness in their dining-rooms, whereas in our own days we prefer white and gold decoration, brightness, and brilliant flowers.

Phelps and his wife had been greatly upset at the unusual discovery of a dead man in the house, therefore, while I ate my meal I reassured him that the stranger had died from natural causes.

"He was a thief, I suppose, Phelps," I added. "Heard a noise, and succumbed to the excitement."

"Have they discovered anything more about the terrible affair over the way, sir," he inquired, as he poured out my glass of chablis.

"No, Phelps. That's a mystery, but, happily, it does not concern us."

"Then you don't think, sir, that the intrusion of the unknown gentleman here has any connection with the affair over the way? The reporters were this morning assuring me that it had."

"Not at all," I declared. "All imagination on their part. The newspapers must have something to say."

"Yes, sir. Have you seen the evening papers, sir. They're full of it—interviews, photographs, even plans of the house."

"Yes," I snapped, rather annoyed. "When I came in just now there were quite a number of people lounging outside, looking up in curiosity. Argyll Road has suddenly become famous."

Phelps had crossed to the sideboard, when suddenly he turned, exclaiming—

"Oh, forgive me, sir. I've been so worried today that I quite forgot. About six o'clock, sir, a young lady called to see you. She was very

disappointed that you were not in, and seemed in a great hurry. She came in a moment and wrote this message, sir."

And he handed me one of my own envelopes.

I tore it open. A glance at the signature caused me to start.

It was from the mysterious Xenia.

Reading through the note I sprang to my feet.

There was not a moment to lose.

"Phelps, get my hat and coat—quick!" I cried breathlessly. "Quick! If I'm not back for a week don't be surprised, but go round to-morrow to Dr. Blythe and tell him that I've been suddenly called away, and that I'll write. Don't mention either the lady or this note. You know nothing, Phelps, remember—nothing."

"I quite understand, sir."

And as the bent old man went out into the hall to obtain my coat, I glanced breathlessly across at the old French clock upon the mantel-shelf.

There was not a moment to spare—not a second!

A single instant too late and the opportunity of seeing her and obtaining an explanation would be gone from me for ever!

CHAPTER VII

THROUGH THE NIGHT

THE hastily scribbled note I reread in the taxi on my way past Kensington Church, eastward.

I lit a vesta and by its fickle light made out the scrawled words in a foreign hand :—

"DEAR FRIEND,—I came here purposely to see you and at great risk to myself. I must see you before I leave England. Can you come to Clapham Common, south side, to-night. You will find me with a motor-car at the corner of Elms Road at a quarter to eight. If you are not there by eight I shall be compelled to leave. XENIA."

I sat in a frenzy of impatience. The night was dark and muddy, and the traffic in the High Street seemed abnormal.

My watch showed that it was already eighteen minutes to eight as we turned into Queen's Gate, and the driver put on all speed along the straight, deserted road. I had promised him double fare, and, in addition, to pay any fine he might incur for exceeding the limit. I had also told him I was a doctor, and he

no doubt believed me to be called to an urgent case.

At last we sped across Chelsea Bridge, and then plunged into a maze of turnings in Battersea, subsequently crossing two main thoroughfares, which I recognised as the Battersea Park Road and Lavender Hill, until of a sudden we came out upon the north side of the dark common.

The journey was an exciting one, for I was full of eager anticipation of seeing her again, hoping that she would enlighten me regarding my mysterious visitor who had expired so unaccountably.

Again I struck a vesta to glance at my watch.

With sinking heart I saw that it was just eight o'clock, and I carried the right time, I knew.

Leaning out, I urged the driver to hurry.

"Right you are, sir," he responded, without turning to me. "I know the road quite well. It's close to the Windmill. We're quite near now."

I bent forward, peering ahead, but could see neither headlights nor tail-lamp of any standing car. The long road, with houses on one side and the open common on the other, was dark and unfrequented. Several taxis passed and repassed, but my eyes, strained before me, could distinguish no waiting car in the distance.

It had already struck eight. Perhaps, after all, she could wait no longer.

I blamed the exemplary Phelps for not remembering to give me the note when I had come in. I should never forgive him.

The taxi was now travelling at a high speed over the uneven road, flinging me about terribly, yet I did not care. I felt that if only I could meet her I could obtain some solution of the mystery.

"There's a car, sir!" shouted the driver excitedly. "Look on the left. Can't you see the red back-lamp? I can."

I could see nothing, but the man's eyes, by long practice, were far keener than mine upon the road.

Indeed, several moments passed ere I could make out the tiny speck of red in the distance. Of a sudden my heart gave a great bound. Was it Xenia, after all?

The driver pushed along for all he was worth, but suddenly, as we drew up to the standing car, it shot away before us, slowly at first, but quickly gathering speed it dashed along in the direction of Balham Hill.

"By Jove! he's getting away, sir," remarked my man. "Shall we follow?"

"Yes, catch him up. I'll give you a sovereign if you do," I cried. "I must overtake that car!"

The man let his engine out, and soon we were tearing along. Yet we did not decrease the distance between us.

"He's got a big car, sir," the driver remarked. "I'm afraid it'll be no go if he gets on a bit o' straight road. If he gets into turnings then we shall get even with him."

"When you are near enough, hail the driver and say I want to speak with him a moment."

"All right, sir," replied the man, as again he bent over his steering-wheel.

In Balham the car was compelled to slow down for a wagon, but ere we could get up behind again he had moved off, taking a turning on the left from the High Road, and continuing along Bedford Hill by a road which brought us out across another common—Tooting Common, I afterwards found it to be.

The chase was now a hot one, rendered the more exciting by the fact that even then I was unaware whether my dainty little friend was actually in the car.

Suddenly, when at the railway bridge, half-way across the common, the car in front slackened, for we grew nearer the red back-lamp. My driver shouted, but curiously enough the car in front increased her speed as a result.

Then it suddenly dawned upon me that if Xenia had looked through the back window and watched us following her, she might believe that we were doing so with some evil design. Hence she would give orders to go faster!

"That car's a sixty, I should think, by the way she moves," my man declared gruffly. "We haven't a ghost of a chance against her, sir, on a flat road."

"But I must overtake it!" I shouted to him. "Keep on. He may get into traffic presently."

"Let's hope he does," was the low reply. "I'm afraid of my petrol giving out. I hadn't too much when you picked me up in Kensington."

His statement caused my heart to sink again, for I could see that the car was gradually drawing away, although we were going for all we were worth, and our springs were being terribly shaken.

Having crossed the common we went up a very narrow, winding road which brought us into Streatham Hill, close to the station, but suddenly the car in front, instead of continuing, crossed into a long, quiet road of detached suburban residences, which I subsequently knew to be the Leigham Court Road, and presently slowed down again.

"He's trying to find a turning!" cried my driver. "Now's our time!" And increasing speed he dashed along at a pace which far exceeded the limit and was certainly dangerous to the public. On turning a sharp bend we found to our delight that he was just before us, having pulled up at the kerb.

The driver was inquiring his way of a servant-maid who had just posted a letter in the pillar-box.

As we pulled up level with him I saw a pale, anxious face at the window of the car.

It was Xenia! She was alone.

In an instant I was out, and then, for the first time, she realised that it was I who had been following.

"Why, Dr. Vesey!" she cried; "is it really you? I—I thought—how silly of me—I thought you were an enemy, not a friend. I've been watching you ever since we left Clapham Common."

"It was all my fault," I said. "I received your message too late."

And I opened the door to allow her to descend.

We told our men to wait, and then strolled together along the quiet, deserted road, until we were out of hearing.

"I'm so sorry," she exclaimed at last, "sorry I can't stay and talk with you, but I have to be at Dover Pier at eleven to catch the Channel boat, you know."

"Dover Pier!" I echoed. "Why didn't you go by train?"

"Well—because there are certain reasons which prevent it," she laughed uneasily. "I do not wish to run any unnecessary risk."

"No, of course not," I said; "but you speak always in enigmas, you know."

She was very plainly dressed in black, with a close-fitting hat, and in her hand she carried a large sealskin muff.

"Well," she said, "to go by road to Dover is, I think, the wisest plan. There may be certain persons who might watch me leave Charing Cross. In the darkness of Dover Pier it is not difficult to slip on board the Channel steamer."

"But do be careful," I urged. "There are watchful eyes, even there."

"Alas! I know," she said. "But—well, it is not the police whom I fear so much as certain others—my enemies."

We were walking slowly side by side up the deserted road. The wind blew in wild gusts through the bare branches of the trees above, while each suburban house we passed shed a warm welcome light from its windows.

"Where are you going?" I inquired.

She was silent for a moment.

"I—well, really, I hardly know my destination," she said. "I shall not know until I arrive in Paris to-morrow morning. I must hurry to catch the boat. The weather is bad and the roads, they say, are none too good. Your roads in England are not like those in France for automobiles," she added, speaking with just the slightest and yet pleasant foreign accent.

"Well, Miss Xenia," I said, after a few seconds' silence, "let us come to the point. I found your note—and—and the body lying in the hall. It was the reverse of pleasant, I assure you."

"Ah yes, I know—I quite understand. Yet I could do nothing else. I waited, but you did not return, so I left with a promise to see you later—a promise which I have fulfilled—eh? I have read the papers to-night," she added.

"A man was killed in the house opposite mine," I said. "You were aware of that when you came to my door?"

She was silent. Her splendid eyes were cast upon the ground. Beneath the street-lamp I saw the haggard expression upon her countenance.

"I hardly think it is of use to deny it," I remarked, rather severely. "You promised me an explanation. May I not have one?"

"I have no time," she protested. "If I do not get away at once I shall lose the boat at Dover."

"Then why have you brought me here, if not to explain, Miss Xenia?" I demanded.

She halted, and, looking straight in my face, said—

"You have been very good to me, Dr. Vesey, and—well, I called upon you to thank you, that's all. My thanks I now repeat. We shall meet again some day, and perhaps I may be able to do you some little service in return."

"Really," I said, "you are so very mysterious. Surely you can satisfy my natural curiosity as to whether you were aware of the tragedy that had occurred at the house opposite mine."

"I cannot remain here," she declared anxiously, in her endeavour to evade my question.

"But surely you can give me an answer, yes or no. May I not know the name of the man you met in my house?"

"Ah," she cried, "it was terrible. I—I heard a ring, and believing it to be you, I foolishly opened the door, and met him face to face—that man of all the men in the world."

"You feared him—eh?"

"Yes. I feared and I hated him. I——"

And she stopped short, without concluding her sentence.

Her breath came and went in short, quick gasps, and I saw what an effect the mere recollection of the incident had upon her.

"He died a natural death. I established that fact by a post-mortem examination this evening."

"Natural causes!" she echoed, in a voice of disbelief.

"Yes."

"Then—then he was not murdered?" she demanded quickly, in a low, hoarse whisper.

CHAPTER VIII

CONCERNS XENIA'S SECRET

I MADE a negative reply, much puzzled at the eagerness of her demand.

Did she believe, then, that the young Italian had met with foul play? How could she, when she was alone in the house?

"I—I really cannot stay longer," she cried suddenly, with a slight trace of accent. "Pray let me go, Dr. Vesey. I will write to you, and if you will meet me somewhere abroad I will be pleased. Then, perhaps, I may be at liberty to tell you more. For the present please remain satisfied."

"But this is hardly satisfactory," I protested. "I must know more. The whole affair is such a complete enigma."

"To me also, just as it is to you," she declared, her foreign accent again the more marked in her excitement, for she seemed in terrible anxiety lest she should not arrive on Dover Pier in time.

"Then all is not clear to you—eh?"

"Far from it," was her quick reply. "Do please let me get off. Meet me somewhere abroad—but

it must be in secret. I know I am watched closely, therefore, once in Paris, I must endeavour, if possible, to efface my identity—to go into hiding in some out-of-the-way place where my presence will not be suspected."

"Why are you in such dread of being followed?"

"Ah, my dear friend," she sighed, "you do not know. You are in entire ignorance of the curious inexplicable circumstance of which I am the victim. If you knew all—ah! when you know all you will pity me."

"Miss Xenia, I promised you to become your friend," I said, in deep earnestness. "You will not find me wanting in true friendship, I hope."

"I am sure I will not," she said, suddenly extending her hand in eagerness to leave me.

Then a suggestion flashed across my mind.

"You are alone!" I exclaimed; "may I not accompany you to Dover?"

For a second she hesitated, but I persuaded her, and with a light laugh she consented.

Surely ours was a strange escapade.

Three minutes later I had paid my taxi-driver, and was seated beside her in the big limousine with its white, glaring head-lamps, speeding away towards Dover.

For some minutes we sat side by side, without uttering a word.

The mystery surrounding my fair companion had filled my senses. About her was a sweet, subtle

perfume which seemed to pervade the interior of the car—a well-fitted one, which had obviously been hired.

Not long ere I recognised that we were in Bromley, and very soon we were beyond the traffic and electric lights of London. The road the driver was taking, I saw, was by way of Wrotham and Maidstone—the main Folkestone road, and would therefore probably branch off at Charing and go through Canterbury.

Suddenly we were passing through a well-lit road, and in the light from the shops I saw that her beautiful countenance was pale and rigid. She was staring straight before her, her lips half parted, her gaze fixed, her brows slightly knit. A ray of light caught the bangle upon her wrist, causing it to gleam with a hundred fires.

"Well!" she exclaimed at last, with a faint, hollow laugh.

"Put yourself in my place for a moment," I said. "Would you not be seized by keen curiosity if such strange things had happened to you as happened to me last night?"

"If strange things happened to you," she said, "stranger things still have happened to me—things which are utterly inexplicable. Ah! could I but tell you—if I could relate to you the strange story—I would, believe me, I would—for I am in sad need of the advice and help of a friend like yourself. But I cannot—I dare not. Hence I must allow you

to misjudge me, and believe that I am bent upon deceiving you," she cried.

"But at least you will assist in bringing the assassin to justice," I said. "That young man was secretly done to death in the house opposite—struck down from behind, and——"

"How do you know he was struck from behind?" she asked anxiously, interrupting me.

"From the position of the wound," I replied.

"Then they have discovered how he was killed? Tell me," she urged, bending to peer into my face.

"Yes," I replied. "The post-mortem revealed that, on entering that room, the assassin, who was probably lurking behind the big *portière* curtain of the folding doors, crept up behind him, and with a thin, triangular dagger struck him in the neck."

"Ah no!" she shrieked, involuntarily covering her face with her muff, as though to shut out the recollection of some terrible scene of which she had been witness.

I sat looking at her in wonder. My mind became flooded with strange theories. At one moment she resorted to a clever evasion of explanation, and yet at the next she seemed honest and genuine in her declarations.

That she was in dire distress was plainly evident. Her eyes, dark-rimmed and deep-set, betrayed traces of recent tears, while her beautiful face was pale, drawn, and haggard.

Upon her conscience lay some terrible secret. She longed to unburden herself, to seek advice and protection, and yet she dare not reveal anything. Why? Would such revelation incriminate herself?

Such was the theory which became forced upon me more and more each mile farther we travelled over those dark wet roads towards the coast.

It was upon my tongue to tell her of the strange message I had received in Italian over the telephone, but I refrained. I intended, at all hazards, to keep the appointment which was so evidently made in Venice, and there to watch proceedings.

"Really, it is very tantalising," I said at last, "that you can reveal nothing to me." We were out upon the country high-road now, tearing through the dark night with all the speed that the driver dare let out of his powerful car.

"It must be," she admitted, in a sweet voice, much calmer than before. "If I could only tell you the whole truth you would be astounded—you would never believe me."

"And I take it that you are a victim?" I said quietly.

"Yes," she exclaimed quickly, in a hard, bitter voice. "I am the victim of my enemies, but—but with your aid, Dr. Vesey, I hope I may yet triumph."

"One man has already lost his life. Who was he?" I inquired, hoping she would reveal his identity.

"You ask me a question that I cannot answer," she replied.

"Cannot answer? Surely you knew him? You can't deny that?" I said.

"I deny nothing," was her answer as she turned her face to me in the darkness. "Neither do I admit anything."

"Except that you were acquainted with the man who was killed in the house opposite mine."

"Yes; I admit that I knew him."

"And that you were at the house at the time of the crime."

She held her breath, moved uneasily in her seat, and then slowly nodded an affirmative.

"Why did you seek me?"

"I told you. Because I was in need of a friend," was her prompt response.

"And how did you know that I should consent to assist you?"

"I did not know. I only hoped that you would, and in my hope I was not disappointed."

"You knew me—eh?"

"I have no reason to deny that I did."

"Then we had met before; but I confess I am quite unconscious of it," I remarked.

"Yes, we met under very curious circumstances," she replied, with a light laugh. "Ah, you will not remember it; but we did. So, as I wanted a friend, I came to you."

"You came to me—why?"

"I had an object."

"What?"

"Nothing. I was followed," she said. "Wherever I go, alas! I seem dogged by spies. That is the worst of——" but she pulled herself up and broke off abruptly.

"The worst of what?"

She gave vent to a nervous little laugh and answered—

"The worst of—well, of being under a cloud."

I knew that was not what she had intended to say. With her woman's keenness of wit she was clever in her subterfuges. If a woman is bent upon preserving a secret she can do so with far greater pertinacity than a man. He is indeed a fool who says a woman cannot keep a secret.

The car was tearing along in the darkness, and ever and anon with its sudden swerving we were thrown against each other.

Once her gloved hand grasped my arm involuntarily. Its contact thrilled me.

"At eleven o'clock we shall part, Miss Xenia," I exclaimed presently, after a long silence You will leave England, and I shall be left in ignorance of what peril has threatened you, or of what actually occurred last night. Surely you are able to tell me something?"

"I am, alas! not a free agent," was her quiet, earnest answer. "If I could, I would willingly tell you all I know."

"There was a terrible and secret crime committed in that house across the way, and you intend to bring the assassin to justice. You admit that, don't you?"

"Yes; but unfortunately I, myself, am in ignorance as to the actual motive, or of why my enemies so persistently pursue me."

"But could not the assassin be traced by certain information which you might furnish?" I suggested.

"That is a matter for the police, not for me," she protested. "But I tell you this, that whatever inquiries the police may make, or whatever clues they may believe they obtain, yet their endeavours will all be to no avail. They will never trace the guilty person. Every precaution has been taken, therefore take my advice and remain inactive until such time as I can reveal the truth to you."

"But the man I found lying dead at the foot of my stairs! Who was he? You may surely tell me that?"

She shrugged her shoulders with a distinctly foreign gesture without replying.

"You have already admitted that you recognised him—that your encounter was unexpected—and was a great shock to you both."

"He was a man I knew—that was all," she said, with an almost superhuman effort to remain calm. I saw that her hands were trembling.

"But why were you in such deadly fear of him?"

"While he lived I was not in fear. It was only after his death that I became in danger. That was why I was compelled to fly before your return."

'Who are these enemies of yours?" I demanded. "Cannot I assist you against them? May I not help you?"

"You cannot at this moment, except by preserving complete silence," she said quickly. "No one knew of my visit to you last night, except one person—and he is dead. Yet ere long I may be thankful of your help. In the meanwhile, my safety, nay, my very life, lies in your hands, Dr. Vesey," she declared, turning to me and placing her gloved hand upon my arm in order to emphasise her words.

Suddenly, almost before I was aware of it, there showed for a second a bright flashlight on the left-hand side of the dark road. Then it disappeared again. Next instant, as we rapidly approached, it showed again, and went out, and still again a third time, ere we passed the dark cross-roads whence the light had come.

The girl at my side, seeing it, gave vent to a low scream.

"Ah," she cried, "there is danger! They are watching for us!" and bending forward she hammered at the glass in front to draw the attention of the

driver. Then, seizing the speaking-tube with frantic haste, she shouted—

"Pull up at once. Go back, and take the left-hand road."

The man shut off, put down his brakes, and in a few seconds brought the car to a standstill.

"Was that a signal?" I asked of her quickly.

"Yes. Fortunately, I saw it in time. We have just passed Lenham. I had no idea we had already come so far."

"Then you have a friend on this road—eh?" I asked in surprise.

It seemed remarkable that such a watchful vigilance was being kept for the passing of her car.

"Yes, I am warned," she said, as the car was backed slowly to the cross-roads, where I expected some one to appear from the deep shadow of the high hedgerow. But no one came, and presently we turned off on the road to the left, which I realised would mean a wide detour.

My fair companion seemed very uneasy and apprehensive. She peered eagerly into the darkness ahead, and sat in feverish anxiety for a full quarter of an hour without uttering a single word.

Then, suddenly, she said—

"You are so good to me, Dr. Vesey, that I wonder if I might crave another favour of you? Should a contretemps occur—I mean, should we be stopped—would you render me further assistance and save me? You can, if you only will."

"How?" I inquired quickly.

"By presenting yourself as a police officer to any one who stops us. You are Inspector Michie, of Scotland Yard, and I am your prisoner. If you play the part of agent of the *sûreté* you can save me."

"Certainly I will, if you so desire," I said, for I had now entered thoroughly into the spirit of the strange night-adventure.

"Excellent!" she exclaimed, with reassurance. "I shall pretend to be your unhappy prisoner," and she laughed a low, musical laugh.

Yet scarcely had it escaped her lips when, straight ahead, we saw a hurricane lamp being waved in the middle of the road, and, our driver noticing it at the same moment, instantly slackened speed.

"Something ahead, miss!" he cried as he half turned towards us. "Perhaps it's a police trap. They've timed us, I suppose, from somewhere."

"No, go on—go on!" cried the girl, half frantic with terror.

Therefore, again he let out his engine, but only for a few moments, for ere I realised what had happened, we were at the spot where the light had been waved, and there, surely enough, a strange thing befell us, an incident so weird and curious that even now, as I write every detail, it is still impressed indelibly upon my memory.

By it the whole mystery of the affair in Argyll Road had become increased a thousandfold.

And I realised for the first time how entirely dependent upon me was the sweet-faced girl who now clung to me for help and protection.

And yet was I not acting against the law in shielding her from justice?

CHAPTER IX

THE CAPTIVATING CAPTAIN

THE car stopped, but ere it had done so the door was flung open, and the dark figure of a man appeared on the side where my companion sat.

He wore a golf cap and overcoat, but in the light reflected from the head-lights I could not distinctly see his features. He seemed to be about thirty, tall and of military bearing.

My companion shrieked and drew back, clinging to me as she recognised him.

"Ah, it was a trap!" she cried. "By that false warning I was turned out of my road. I have been betrayed, after all! Save me, Dr. Vesey! Save me!"

The stranger, instead of showing any antagonism, raised his cap politely and addressed her in that language of which I had no knowledge—the same in which she had spoken over the telephone on my return home with her dressing-bag.

Then instantly she seemed to recognise him.

What he told her caused her to start in surprise, and leaning towards him she questioned him in the same language.

Then they conversed quickly, he standing with cap in hand the while, in an attitude of deference.

Suddenly, involuntarily it seemed, she broke into French, and then I could understand.

"Is this really so?" she asked.

"His Excellency telegraphed to me at Canterbury at six o'clock this evening."

"Then to go there is distinctly dangerous—eh?" she asked.

"Distinctly so."

"What is known?"

"Nothing. His Excellency is still in ignorance."

"And his wife?"

"She is at Montreux—Hotel Excelsior."

"If I went there?"

"It would not be wise. Remember you will surely be met at the Gare du Nord in Paris, and followed wherever you go."

"And at Calais?"

"I think not. They will expect you in Paris, and wait for you there. They probably have been informed of your impending arrival. Every arriving train from London has been watched for six days past."

"*Bien!* What do you advise?" she asked, speaking sharply and abruptly. "Ah, how can I thank you sufficiently for all this!"

"If I might presume to advise," replied the stranger, continuing to peer at me with some apprehension, "I should think the wisest plan on

arrival at Calais would be to go in the opposite direction. Take a ticket for Cologne and you would get away at once, travelling by Herbesthal and Aix, and arrive in Cologne just before noon. Rest there till to-morrow night, and go on to Hamburg. You could remain quite undiscovered there."

"At what hotel?"

"The Palace, on the Alster. I will communicate with you there."

"Very well—in the name of Miss Wilson. I shall pass as English."

"And your friend?" he asked; "is he to be trusted?"

"Ah," she cried suddenly, "I have not introduced you! This is my friend, Dr. Vesey, of London—Captain Janesco."

He bowed, his cap still in his hand, and said in French, with great politeness—

"I am honoured by acquaintance with Monsieur le Docteur."

"And I assure you the honour is mutual," I replied in the same language.

Then, for the first time, they both realised that I had understood the conversation, but neither made remark.

Janesco was a half Italian or Spanish name, and yet it was neither.

"Well, that is agreed," declared my fair companion in French, for, as she remarked, the Captain did not

understand English. "I shall be in Hamburg the day after to-morrow—if you are quite sure that course is best."

"It certainly is. His Excellency up to the present knows nothing. The English papers will probably not reach him for another couple of days, and even then, with the London police in ignorance, he will never suspect the truth."

"We must not wait longer, or I shall not be at Dover in time!" exclaimed the girl anxiously. "Can I take you anywhere?"

"Yes, back into Canterbury. I must be in London again in the morning."

Therefore she made room between us for the Captain; the door was closed and we again moved off into the darkness, the road running through a long wood, and then out again to Moldash and Chilham, in the direction of Canterbury.

"You spoke, Captain, of the police being in ignorance of the truth a moment ago," I said. "I presume you refer to the affair in Kensington?"

He was silent, whereupon Xenia assured him that I was her friend, and that I could be trusted.

"Yes, doctor—I spoke of that most unfortunate and regrettable affair," he said. "I think we are both interested in getting mademoiselle to a place where she will no longer be in the serious peril she now finds herself in."

"I have promised my assistance, and I will give it in any way it is desired," I assured him. "Indeed,

if necessary, I, too, will go to Hamburg," I suggested, for, truth to tell, the mystery of it all had so overwhelmed me, and her beauty had so entranced me, that I was very loath to part from her now that I had found her.

"I hardly think that is necessary, doctor," was her quick response. "I much appreciate your generous offer, but your companionship might betray me. Besides, if you left England at this moment would not the suspicions of your police be aroused? You will probably be required as a witness."

"As a dumb witness," I said, whereat they both laughed.

Her reply disappointed me, for I was eager to accompany her, feeling that by remaining at her side I might be able at last to solve the enigma.

Again I referred to my suggestion, but she would not hear of it, and Captain Janesco seemed also against it.

"I hardly think it would be wise," he declared.

"But, Mademoiselle Xenia should have some one near her if she is in peril," I said.

"She will not be in peril if she escapes from England and avoids Paris."

"But the police watch all departing travellers by the Channel boats."

"It is not the police mademoiselle fears so much as her enemies," the Captain replied. Now that he sat next to me I was able to distinguish that he was a rather handsome man, dark, with regular

features and a well-trained moustache—a typical foreign officer.

"I have been endeavouring to induce mademoiselle to tell me something regarding the tragic affair and the discovery I made in my own house. I need not describe it. You, of course, know of it."

"Yes, doctor, I know everything. Mademoiselle is not in a position to tell you the truth any more than I am. Yet I am mademoiselle's friend—as you also profess yourself to be."

"It is no mere profession on my part," I protested. "I am her friend. She sought me out, and—well, we immediately became friends."

"And without your help, doctor, I—I might have failed—indeed, I might also have been dead," she declared, in a low, intense voice which showed me plainly how deep was her recognition of the very small service I was able to render her.

The car was tearing through the night. Rain was falling, driving hard against the windows. So heavy was it that the driver had been compelled to raise his blurred wind-screen, for he could not see through it.

The Captain, turning to her, expressed a hope that her crossing might not be a rough one, whereupon she laughed lightly, replying—

"I have travelled too much to heed either wind or weather. As long as I escape the vigilance of my enemies, I care nothing."

"But have a care of yourself, Xenia. They may

be watching at Calais, but I think not. Keep your eyes well open. Do not take a ticket for Cologne. Make pretence that you have lost it, and pay the controller on the train. He will visit you after leaving for the French frontier."

"If they are watching for me, do you think they will recognise me?" she asked anxiously.

"The face of mademoiselle would be recognisable anywhere—such beauty is not common," was the Captain's gallant reply.

"Please do not flatter, Captain Janesco!" she exclaimed, in severe rebuke. "I am in no humour for it."

"I ask pardon," he said, instantly humiliated. "In reply to mademoiselle's question, I should say that recognition is not likely. Your hair is dressed differently, and as far as I can make out you are attired in disguise."

"Yes," she laughed. "I borrowed these things from my maid. She will be wearing my furs, I suppose, to-morrow."

Then, for the first time, I realised that her extreme neatness was due to the fact that she wore the black dress and cloth jacket of a lady's-maid.

"I think, Miss Xenia, that you would be wise to hide your diamond bangle," I remarked. "It is hardly in keeping with your guise of a *femme de chambre*."

"You are quite right," she declared. "I really

forgot all about it. I can easily hide it beneath my woollen gloves," and she drew up her gloves over it, hiding it from view.

"Now, tell me, Dr. Vesey," she added, "do I present anything of the same appearance as when you first opened your door to me?"

"Not at all," I assured her. "As far as clothes go, your appearance is entirely changed. It was a good idea to adopt your maid's dress."

"What," she added, "does it suit me?"

"Ah," I laughed, "that's surely a very unfair question. It suits the occasion. That is all, I think, that need be said."

We were passing the fickle lights of a village street when the Captain suddenly exclaimed in French—

"This is Thannington. We are close to Canterbury. I must leave you in a few minutes, mademoiselle," and, taking his cap in his hand, with exquisite politeness he wished her *bon voyage*.

"You will telegraph to me your safe arrival in Hamburg," he said. "And you will be Miss Wilson there?"

"Agreed," she said, and very quickly we found ourselves in one of the main streets of Canterbury.

The Captain took my hand in greeting, and expressed a hope that we should meet again. The glimpses I had obtained of him in the passing lights had caused me rather to like him.

Then my fair companion stopped the car just

as we suddenly turned off to the left, and he again bowed low and wished her farewell.

Turning to me, he added—

"Dr. Vesey, both you and I have the welfare of mademoiselle at heart, therefore we are friends —are we not?"

"Most certainly," I responded.

"I am much gratified," he declared, and with a farewell greeting he opened the door, alighted, and disappeared, while we moved away again on the last stage of our night-run out of the city, and along that long straight way which led us over the dark, bleak Barham Downs, through Lydden village and Ewell to Dover.

"Who is Captain Janesco?" I asked, after we had sat side by side in silence for some minutes.

"Ah, to-night has brought to me a strange revelation!" she said, in a low voice. "I believed him always to be my enemy. Indeed, he was my enemy, and now, just when I most desire friends, he has become mine. Had he not warned me I should have run straight into the arms of those who seek my destruction. Can you see your watch?" she asked anxiously. "Shall we be in Dover in time?"

"By Jove!" I cried, as I saw that it wanted twenty-eight minutes to eleven. "We've come along marvellously quickly. Canterbury is fifteen miles from Dover and we've surely gone six miles, therefore we shall be at the pier just before eleven."

"I do hope so," she said, with a sigh. "I shall never forget the great kindness you have shown me, Dr. Vesey. Some day I hope to be able to repay it. You are extremely kind to offer to see me as far as Hamburg, but I am quite used to travelling alone. Besides, if you are devoted to my interests, as you say, it will be far better for you to return, appear as witness, and for the present make no sign that we are acquainted."

"You wish me to do that?" I asked.

"Yes. I ask you to do so—for my sake," she said, in that low sweet voice which had so charmed me when she had sat in the arm-chair before my fire.

"Captain Janesco spoke to you in a tongue that was strange to me," I said. "What was it? It sounded something like Italian."

"Ah, it was Hungarian!"

"And he is Hungarian, I suppose?"

She replied in the affirmative.

"And you?"

"English when I am in England—French in France—and—well—and Miss Wilson when in Hamburg," was her quick, mischievous response.

"You will tell me nothing," I said, in deep disappointment.

"If you will write to me I will reply," she answered; "but take every precaution, I beg of you. If it should be known that we are acquainted my enemies will certainly seek my whereabouts through you. They are no ordinary persons, but are full of ingenious

cunning and subtle device, therefore be wary until such time as we may meet again, and then——"

"And what then?" I asked, bending to her and peering into her pale, beautiful face.

"Our actions will be governed by circumstance then, as now, I suppose."

A silence fell between us. I sat in the corner, filled with regret and disappointment, until, deep below, showed the lights of Dover town and harbour.

I felt that she was passing from my ken for ever. We who that night had spoken together as though we had known each other for years were now to part—she to fly into hiding, I to return and face the glare of publicity.

She did not speak before the car had pulled up close to the Lord Warden Hotel. Then she descended, and I took her small dressing-case, which the driver handed me. She thanked him and pressed some money into his hand, while at her side I walked upon the pier, alongside of which the night-boat for Calais lay moored.

Both the mail and passenger trains were already in from London I saw, and so we were compelled to hurry forward to the gangway. Ere we reached it the warning-bell was sounding, therefore, with a hurried handclasp and a whispered word of adieu and a deep, earnest expression of thanks, she took her bag and swiftly crossed the gangway to the deck.

She halted for a second to wave her hand gaily

to me, then she disappeared along the deck in the darkness.

I saw her no more.

With sinking heart I watched the gangway drawn inwards, and a few moments later the well-lit steamer slowly left the quay, and with a long blast of her siren moved away on her journey across the Channel.

I stood there watching like a man in a dream—watching until the lights of the disappearing vessel grew smaller and more indistinct in the heavy haze, watching until I could distinguish them no more.

Only I knew that my little friend had not been suspected. The lounging detective had been standing close to me in the shadow as she had passed on to the gangway, and I saw that he had regarded her as an ordinary passenger leaving Dover.

This one fact alone reassured me.

I strained my eyes again seaward, but saw nothing. The mail-boat had become hidden by the fog, although from where I stood I could hear the dull note of her siren warning the shipping in her track.

Truly, my night's adventure had been fraught with much excitement.

One thing, however, I had proved to my own satisfaction, that the mysterious Xenia was no adventuress. She was a lady by birth and she was in sore and genuine distress.

Yet how I longed to solve the mystery of that house across the way.

CHAPTER X

THE HOUSE IN CAMBRIDGE STREET

A WEEK had gone by.

On leaving Dover early on the morning following Xenia's departure I had gone to Canterbury in search of Captain Janesco, the tall, exquisitely polite Hungarian. Inquiry at the various hotels was productive of no result, therefore, remembering his remark that he had to return to London, I returned also.

I was extremely desirous of seeing him again, for our mutual friendship with the mysterious Xenia had somehow, I felt, rendered our interests identical.

The public inquiry concerning the mysterious deaths in the two houses opposite one another duly took place at the Kensington coroner's court, and the papers were full of what they were pleased to term "The Kensington Mystery."

The small court was crowded, for the greatest public excitement had now been aroused concerning the strange affair. The papers had hinted at some Russian or Spanish conspiracy among Anarchists

which had culminated in the inexplicable tragedy, and certainly the evidence of the police seemed to presuppose such theory.

The point which puzzled the public most—and the police also, for the matter of that—was the identity of the persons who had so openly taken illegal possession of Mrs. Kynaston's house. Though they seemed to have been seen by a dozen witnesses, yet not one could be accurately described. As I sat listening to the police evidence I suddenly recollected the face of the man whom I had encountered in the fog as I had approached my house from the High Street—the man who seemed hurrying in the opposite direction, and who had passed me by so closely.

Was it possible that he had just left the house opposite and crossed the road at the spot where I encountered him?

After Dr. Blythe had given evidence in the case of the murdered man—for they were taken separately—I was sworn, and corroborated what my colleague had said regarding the result of our post-mortem.

"Then, in your opinion, the deceased was murdered?" remarked the grey-haired coroner, glancing up quickly from his notes.

"Most decidedly," was my reply.

There was a rustle of paper at the reporters' table, and next instant three boy-messengers made their way out, bearing "copy" for the evening newspapers.

A verdict of "wilful murder" was soon returned, then, after more formalities, the inquiry regarding the dead man found in my house was opened.

I told the court the circumstances in which I had found him, and afterwards Blythe deposed to making the post-mortem and discovering death to be due to natural causes.

This seemed greatly disappointing to those seated on the public benches. They had remained breathlessly interested, hoping to hear some remarkable story connecting the two cases. The man was found dead—that was all, therefore the verdict of "death from natural causes" was returned, and the court rose.

That night the evening papers published the inquest upon the murdered man *in extenso*, and most of the journals had photographs of myself in the act of giving evidence. Poor Phelps was still so pestered by reporters that I fled from my house to the privacy ot the Grand Hotel in Trafalgar Square.

Then, as day succeeded day, and the papers could obtain no further information, the public excitement died down, as it always does in such cases. A murder mystery is nearly always followed by a catastrophe, and the present case was no exception. A terrible colliery accident in the north of England quickly eclipsed the Kensington mystery from the public mind.

One incident that occurred in the coroner's court,

however, now caused me considerable thought. While I stood giving evidence in the case of the discovery at Mrs. Kynaston's I chanced to glance across to the public end of the court, when my eyes fell upon the pale, interested face of a thin, dark-eyed man of middle age. The curious look in his prominent eyes attracted me, and for a few seconds I regarded him steadily.

Then it suddenly occurred to me that he strangely resembled the man with the grey moustache who had passed me in the fog as I had approached my door.

When I had seen him he had been fashionably dressed and wore a silk hat. Now, however, he was shabby, and the lack of moustache considerably altered his features. Yet surely those large, round, prominent eyes were the same!

At that instant the coroner had addressed a question to me, and I was compelled to turn and answer. When I looked again the man had disappeared. He had left the court.

This action of his was curious. It seemed as though he knew that I had recognised him and fled.

I told Millman of it half an hour later, and he at once became keenly interested.

"It's a pity, doctor, you couldn't give me the tip at the time, and we'd have kept observation upon him," he said as we stood together out in the street watching the crowd disperse; "but you'd know him again, I suppose?"

"Oh yes," I replied. "He may disguise his personal appearance, but he'll never be able to alter his eyes."

Recollections of that incident haunted me from day to day.

I had returned to Argyll Road now that the excitement had abated, and often stood at my dining-room window gazing upon the dark exterior of the house of mystery opposite, now closed, awaiting the return of its owner from India.

Often would I try to conjure up in my mind what had occurred there on that fatal night. What part had the pretty Xenia played in that dark tragedy?

I had written in secret to "Miss Wilson" at the Palace Hotel at Hamburg, relating all that had transpired at the inquest and sending her a batch of English newspapers, and now each time I heard the postman's rap in the street I anxiously awaited a response.

The spot at the foot of my own stairs where I had found the dead unknown I never passed but the sight of it recalled vividly to my mind every detail of those weird happenings of that foggy December night. The sight, too, of that arm-chair beside my study fire wherein the dainty Xenia had sat brought back to me memories of her sweet face, of her dire distress, of her pathetic appeal for assistance and protection.

What could be the meaning of it all?

A dozen times Millman had called upon me, and we had discussed theories, and a dozen times I felt half inclined to take him into my confidence, the mystery was so increasingly tantalising.

Yet a word to the police would, I knew, implicate the fair fugitive. The only man who knew the actual truth, the man who was witness of the crime, was, I felt confident, the man who had fallen dead in my house.

Gallini! That was the name ever in my ears. I was longing for the twenty-fourth to arrive in order that I might be present at the Hotel Danieli in Venice and remain observant.

Xenia had not received that message. Strange that if it had been intended for her the mysterious speaker had not recognised my voice to be a man's. But, after all, I remembered that the voice in certain atmospheric conditions is often distorted out of recognition.

On the eighth day after Xenia's flight from London I received a welcome telegram from her with the simple words: "All well.—Wilson." It had been dispatched from Hamburg that morning, and was evidently intended to reassure me.

I longed to find Captain Janesco, and had indeed spent several days in Piccadilly, Bond Street, St. James's Street, and the vicinity, hoping to come across him. But all to no purpose. Perhaps he too had already left for the Continent.

That evening I had just finished dressing, prior

to going out to dine with a friend in Addison Road, when I heard the telephone bell, and descending the stairs answered it.

A man's voice inquired if I were Dr. Vesey, and on responding in the affirmative, he said—

"I'm speaking for Captain Janesco, whom, I believe, you know, and who is here with me. He wishes to see you very particularly this evening, and wants to know if you can call at a hundred and thirty-six Cambridge Street, Edgware Road, at half-past ten o'clock."

My heart gave a bound of delight.

"Certainly," I replied. "Tell the Captain I will be there with pleasure."

"At half-past ten?"

"Yes, at half-past ten," I replied, and then rang off.

It would give me time to dine at Addison Road, and, leaving early, I could still keep the appointment, therefore I went forth full of keen anticipation and eager to meet the tall Hungarian.

Yet could I but have known what was to befall me that evening surely I would never have consented to call at Cambridge Street.

In my ignorance I had, alas, consented to take a step that was entirely against the interests of that sweet-faced girl whose personality had so completely entranced me.

My enthusiasm and devotion to her so blinded me that I discerned no pitfalls.

Yes, you will condemn me, I know. I was a fool.

But let me here confess it. I, prosaic man that I was, had already grown to love her.

And now I stand upon the edge of the abyss—the abyss of the house numbered one hundred and thirty-six Cambridge Street, that turning which you know off the Edgware Road, close to the Marble Arch.

CHAPTER XI

THE ROUND EYES

THE house, one of a long row of similar ones of the usual London type, with deep areas and semicircular fanlights, seemed well-lit and cheerful as I stepped from the taxi and paid the driver.

It had just struck half-past ten, the night being dry and bitterly cold.

A boy was shouting the evening paper at the farther end of the street, while ever and anon came up the roar of the motor-buses from the Edgware Road.

In answer to my ring a smart young German man-servant opened the door, and when I gave my name ushered me into a solidly furnished, old-fashioned sitting-room at the back of the dining-room, where a fire burned brightly in the grate and cosy saddle-bag chairs stood on either side.

"My master will be here in a moment," said the young German, speaking with a strong accent, and retiring, closed the door.

A second later I distinctly heard a woman's voice call "Charles! Charles!" And next moment a

man's gruff voice uttered some low words, as though in anxious reproval.

The room in which I sat seemed to be the study of a studious man, for the walls were lined with books, many of them upon theology and science—a carefully selected library. Upon the tops of the bookcases were some old blue ginger-jars, while on the wall, by the window, were several valuable old coloured sporting prints.

"No, I won't!" I heard the woman's voice again. "I won't stay one moment longer."

"But you will!" cried the man. "You shall! Remember I say what I mean," he added threateningly.

The voices seemed to come through the wall, and, on examination, I found that behind one of the bookcases were folding doors leading into the dining-room. The man and woman were evidently in the adjoining room.

I stood upon the hearthrug, my back to the fire, listening in wonder.

I could hear low conversation, but could catch no words, only the slight, horrified scream of the woman. I was impatient to meet the Captain and consult with him, yet though a full ten minutes elapsed, he did not come.

The quarrel in the adjoining room had ceased, and all was silence, when the door was suddenly opened by a strange-looking little old lady in black, wearing a cap bright with violets and a black lace

shawl about her shoulders. She was hunch-backed and dwarfed, a curious little person, whose figure in other circumstances would have struck me as grotesque, and as she advanced, she exclaimed in a voice which had a senile squeak in it—

"I have to apologise, sir, for Captain Janesco, who lives here with me. He was called out suddenly half an hour ago, and asked me to tell you that he will not be long, if you would kindly wait. He wishes most particularly to see you. His brother is here, and I will ask him to come in and chat with you."

Then the fussy old lady, whose black silk mitts half covered her hands, retired, and again I was left alone.

A few minutes later the door reopened, and turning, I found myself confronted by a man in evening clothes, thin, tall, dark-eyed, and clean-shaven, with closely cropped grey hair and large round eyes.

I recognised him in an instant as the man who had passed me so hurriedly in the fog on the night of the tenth—the same man whom I had seen in the coroner's court listening to the evidence of the police!

"Dr. Vesey, I believe?" he exclaimed in a pleasant, suave manner, and with a slight foreign accent, as he bowed towards me on entering. "You are, I understand, a friend of my brother, the Captain, eh?"

I recovered myself in an instant and did not allow him to see that I had recognised him.

"I am," I replied. "I called here to see him."

"Yes. At his request I telephoned to you. He is extremely anxious to see you to-night about something or other. He told me to apologise for his absence, but he was called out quite suddenly. I expect him back at any moment."

It struck me that it had been this man whom I had heard threatening the woman in the adjoining room—the woman who had declared her intention of leaving the house.

My course, however, was plain—to make pretence of complete ignorance and to watch.

The man's eyes were unusually prominent, his face of a somewhat Hebrew cast. His complexion, slightly sallow, was that of a South Hungarian, though he resembled in no degree his tall, handsome brother, the Captain.

He took from a cupboard at the side of the fireplace a box of good cigars, and offered me one, taking one himself. And as he handed me a match I saw that upon his well-manicured hand was a splendid ruby ring of great value.

He spoke English excellently. Hungarians, like Russians, are often magnificent linguists. As he cast himself into one of the arm-chairs and invited me to be seated, he began to chat with the easy grace of a well-born man.

"I have been a good many years in London,"

he explained. "I'm in business in the City. My brother still remains in Budapest with his regiment. He's over here on six months' leave. Do you know our country?" he asked between the whiffs of his cigar.

"I know Budapest a little," I said. "I've stayed at the Hungaria there, and I've been in Szegedin and Temesvar."

"But there is no place like your London, after all," he laughed lightly. "At least, that is my opinion."

He explained that he was a native of Tolna, on the Danube, where his father had large agricultural possessions, to which he had succeeded. But he preferred a business life in London to the idleness and luxuries of the Roumanian capital.

Yet while he spoke, I sat back, gazing at him through the haze of cigar-smoke, puzzled and full of wonder.

What connection had this soft-spoken gentlemanly man with the mysterious tragedy? That he had some connection with it I was fully convinced. I thought of Xenia, and of her terror of some person whom she refused to name.

Was it of this man before me—this man who had shaved off his grey moustache and disguised himself so that he should not be recognised?

With difficulty I concealed my suspicion, and, smoking calmly, assumed an air of patience for the coming of the Captain.

Suddenly the front-door bell rang, and my companion, rising with a word of apology, went forth into the hall. Then I heard another low conversation in the adjoining room, and a few minutes' later he re-entered, accompanied by three other men—one a bald-headed, white-bearded, round-faced man in a heavy overcoat trimmed with astrakhan, another a thin, alert-looking, middle-aged man in black, and the third a rather alcoholic-looking person in dark grey.

I looked askance at the three strangers, and they, in turn, seemed to view me with some curiosity.

"These are three friends of mine, Mr. Sebright," said Janesco airily, addressing me.

I looked at him in astonishment.

"Sebright?" I echoed. "What do you mean? My name isn't Sebright!"

"I know, of course," he laughed. "I must apologise." And I saw that he cast a strange look at the eminently respectable man with the white beard.

"These gentlemen are great friends of my brother. They also are waiting to see him."

"But he made an appointment with me," I said.

"Oh, he'll be back very shortly," was his response.

The three men did not utter a word. Two of them stood upon the hearthrug near me, and selected cigars, while the elder, still in his overcoat, seated himself in a chair close to the table. I must say that I viewed all three with some suspicion,

yet their exteriors were those of perfectly respectable persons.

The situation was, to say the least, a very curious one.

Secretly I was pleased that I had met this man—that, at any rate, I knew where he dwelt, for it was certain that he had some knowledge of the inexplicable crime in that house opposite my own. Again, a most curious fact had become impressed upon me now that I sat reflecting. The neat, fair-haired young German man-servant who had opened the door very strongly resembled the young man whom I had seen dead in that upstairs room—the same eyes, the same closely cropped hair, the same moustache—the servant was almost an exact replica of the man who lay struck dead by an unknown hand.

I longed to rise from my chair and demand from the man before me an explanation of that terrible affair. Indeed, it was upon the tip of my tongue to refer to it. Yet, on reflection, I saw that if I betrayed any sign of recognition, success must be lost to me for ever.

For Xenia's sake—because I had promised to be her friend—it was my duty to remain patient and watchful, to act judiciously and seek solution of the great mystery beneath the shadow of which she had fallen.

As he reached the matches, which lay across the table, he turned suddenly upon me, and, fixing his big eyes upon mine, said—

"I think, Mr. Sebright, we may as well be open with each other. Let me resume our conversation, which was interrupted by the arrival of our friends here. You can talk quite frankly before them. They, too, are interested in the affair in Kensington. You say you have recognised me as a person whom you have seen before."

I must have started. I had foolishly believed that I had not betrayed myself, yet the fellow was shrewder than I had imagined.

In his quick speech his foreign accent was a little more marked. But I must confess that by the suddenness of his remark I was greatly taken aback.

"Well," I managed to stammer, "we certainly have met—one evening, not very long ago, in Argyll Road, on the night of a certain tragic occurrence, to which we need not allude further—eh?"

He nodded in the affirmative and smiled across at his companions.

"I cannot see why you should smile," I protested. "On that night I had a visitor—a lady who sought my protection from you, sir! Do you deny that you were there—in that house?" I asked, boldly facing the three strangers.

"My dear Mr. Sebright, I deny nothing," dryly replied the man with the round eyes.

"But my name is not Sebright, I tell you!" I cried. "It's Vesey—Dr. Vesey."

"Oh, you are a doctor?" exclaimed the white-bearded man; "of medicine, I presume?"

"I am. My name is Hubert Vesey, surgeon. And I live in Argyll Road, Kensington—almost opposite to the house in which a mysterious tragedy was enacted not long ago," I cried hotly.

"Of course, of course," said his alcoholic, pimply-faced companion. "And you were called to examine the body, I believe?"

"I was. I gave evidence at the inquest."

"Yes; we read it all in the papers!" one of the trio exclaimed.

"But you did not read in the papers the fact that, two hours before the discovery of the crime, I met that man standing there," and I pointed to Janesco; "he was coming from the scene of the murder!"

The three exchanged glances, while the man against whom my finger was raised merely shrugged his shoulders and smiled amusedly.

"You are quite certain you met him—eh?" asked the bald-headed man, in a low, calm voice, looking straight into my eyes.

"Positive," was my reply. "But, gentlemen, I cannot see the meaning of all this. I called here to meet Captain Janesco, to whom I was introduced by a certain lady—a lady named Xenia Edmonds, who possesses knowledge of the true facts. The lady called upon me and sought refuge in my house as soon as the poor fellow had been assassinated. She craved my protection."

"The same old story," murmured Janesco to one of the men who stood near him. "Thinks he is

Vesey, the doctor who was called by the police on the night of the affair."

"I *think* I am Vesey?" I cried in fierce indignation. "What do you mean? Do you deny, then, that I am? Why do you call me Sebright?"

"Pray, calm yourself, my dear sir, it's quite all right," said the bald-headed man, whom the other three seemed to treat with profound respect. "Only your story is so very curious and sensational that you will forgive our surprise, won't you?"

"But you haven't heard it yet!" I protested in astonishment at their manner.

"Well," exclaimed the thin-faced man in black, who had, until then, uttered few words, "let us hear your story, then."

And all three stood, with shrewd eyes fixed upon me, as though endeavouring to read my innermost thoughts.

What could it mean? What were their sinister intentions?

CHAPTER XII

ANOTHER SURPRISE

THEIR demeanour irritated me. My words were doubted, and they even addressed me by a name I had never heard before.

Therefore, in manner perhaps more heated than was really necessary, I briefly related how Xenia had sought my protection; how, later, I was called to the house of mystery, and what I found there.

"I met you in the fog going down to the High Street about the time the tragedy was enacted," I declared firmly, turning to Janesco.

"And for that reason, my dear sir, because you have an hallucination that you were mixed up with the tragic affair, you threaten my life!"

"Threaten your life!" I cried astounded. "What do you mean?"

"Did you not bring a revolver here, and not ten minutes ago declare that you would shoot me?"

I turned from him in disgust. The fellow was a barefaced liar.

"A man was killed in that house—foully murdered

—and you know the identity of the assassin!" I cried angrily.

"The mysterious lady who visited you no doubt told you who was the guilty person," he laughed, "so let us drop the matter."

"No, we will not!" I protested quickly, for I saw that the three men were incredulous. "I was called here by you in order to meet your brother, and I am confronted by these three grinning idiots."

The trio only exchanged pitying glances. Neither uttered a word.

"My dear sir, if the story you tell us is the truth," remarked the white-bearded man at last, "would it not be wiser to pause and ask yourself whether the remarkable actions of this unknown lady were those of a perfectly innocent person?"

His words stunned me.

I stood open-mouthed before him.

"I cannot see, sir, how the affair can concern you!" I protested indignantly, when at last I found tongue.

He was a man of refinement and spoke as a gentleman, yet his air seemed curiously superior and severe. His manner irritated me.

"But it does concern me," I went on. "I will devote my life to the unravelling of the mystery, and through that man standing there, bring the guilty one to justice."

"There is really no necessity for such declaration,"

remarked the thin man in black. "But, tell me," he added, looking interestedly into my face, "are you really Dr. Vesey—or do you only imagine that you are?"

"Imagine?" I echoed. "Does a man only imagine he is alive? And yet in this last week or so I admit that my mind has almost become unhinged by the inexplicable circumstances and strange happenings which have so suddenly befallen me."

"Of course you, as a medical man, know that one may sometimes possess strange hallucinations," remarked the bald-headed man.

"But, I tell you, mine are not hallucinations!" I cried quickly. "My name is Vesey—Hubert Vesey—and all that I have told you is gospel truth—and that man standing there knows it."

The Roumanian smiled a strange, supercilious smile, and as his hand carried his cigar to his mouth, the ruby upon his finger glowed blood-red beneath the electric light.

"You are quite certain you are not Mr. Charles Sebright of Torquay?"

"Of course not. Why, a thousand persons could identify me! I'm not dreaming, man!"

Again the fellow Janesco smiled, and his three companions exchanged glances.

"I really cannot see, my dear sir, why you should accuse me of complicity in the curious affair at Kensington. True, I have seen it in the papers,

but there my knowledge of it is at an end," he said carelessly, glancing at me with those strange round eyes.

"That's a lie!" I cried excitedly, advancing towards him. "You have told these gentlemen that I have threatened your life—another wicked lie."

I made an unconscious movement of my hand, whereupon, at sign from him, two of the strangers seized my wrists, while he searched my hip-pocket and drew forth the loaded revolver which I had placed there on leaving my home.

I offered no resistance. What was the use? But the trio exchanged curious glances, while the bald-headed man, taking possession of my weapon, remarked in a hard voice—

"I will keep this for the present."

"You will do nothing of the sort, sir!" I cried indignantly. "Why should you disarm me and annex my property? I have a licence, and you cannot prevent me from carrying it."

A smile of triumph played about the old gentleman's lips, and that increased my anger. I was furious.

"Come," I said, "let us have no more fooling. Explain your game, for I see that I've been misled into coming here. Where is Captain Janesco?"

No one spoke.

"Was I not called here to meet him?"

"Of course you were," laughed his brother.

"Tell us, who is this Captain?" asked the man in funereal black.

I then briefly related how I had accompanied the mysterious Xenia by car to Dover, and how I had been introduced to the smart Hungarian on the way, a story which I saw was utterly disbelieved by all three.

Yet they made pretence of giving credit to my statement, although while speaking with Janesco I noticed that the three strangers standing a little distance from me held consultation in whispered undertones.

That there was some sinister meaning to it all I felt convinced. The strangers were, however, men of culture and refinement, and I did not feel myself in the hands of enemies. Only the man with the round eyes struck me as filled with evil intent. He had accused me of an attempt upon him, and he had uttered glaring falsehoods without any apparent motive.

The strangers then closely questioned me regarding my knowledge of the tragedy and of the fugitive Xenia.

"The man who is the lady's confidential friend is brother of that man yonder—the man I met coming from the house at the time of the crime," I asserted, with considerable warmth.

The fellow's lips relaxed into a sickly smile, but his eyebrows contracted, and he looked straight into my face.

"Recollect that the police have been making inquiries, and have discovered more than you imagine," I added. "They are seeking to discover the assassin of that poor young man who so much resembled that young man-servant who admitted me to this house."

"Oh!" exclaimed the pimply-faced man; "then you find a resemblance between the dead man and the living, do you?"

"I do, most certainly—a resemblance that to me is startling."

"You allege that you are a medical man. Have you never heard of such a thing as mental aberration?"

"I do not say I am what I am not," I cried hotly. "I am a medical man—and——"

"Well, well, we will accept all your remarkable statements," he interrupted.

"And all your false accusations against my unfortunate self," added the round-faced man, with a sneer, which caused my blood to boil.

"I have spoken only what is the truth!" I cried fiercely.

"And I tell you that you are not Dr. Vesey, and, further, what you have told these gentlemen are palpable lies!"

"Hush, hush! Enough!" commanded the bald-headed man in quick reproof.

"Repeat your word," I shouted to Janesco, "and I'll knock you down!"

I advanced upon him with my hands clenched. He had irritated me beyond endurance, and I fear I have a somewhat hot temper.

But the fellow turned to the three strangers, saying—

"Surely, gentlemen, you have seen and heard enough. Poor fellow, he is quite irresponsible, as you bear witness."

"Irresponsible?" I gasped. "You deny me my right name, you accuse me of threats to murder, and now you declare me to be irresponsible. What next?"

Two of the strangers were whispering behind me, and I turned upon them angrily.

"What you have to say, please say aloud!" I cried.

"Well," said the bald-headed old gentleman, "we may as well be quite frank with you, Mr. Sebright. We shall be compelled to detain you here until to-morrow."

"Detain me, why?"

"Oh—well—in order that you may have an opportunity of proving that you are really the person you allege."

"But I tell you I am Hubert Vesey, surgeon," I protested vigorously.

"That you must prove."

"I can prove it easily."

"The easiest way is to go to your home to-morrow, where your servants will, of course, identify

you. You shall be taken there. By the way," he added not unkindly, "have you your latch-key, or anything upon you which might prove the truth of your statement?"

I felt quickly through my pockets, but, unfortunately, found nothing. I had, evidently by inadvertence, left my latchkey at home. In addition, before coming out I had changed my clothes, and left my pocket-book in my other coat.

Another thought occurred to me, and opening my coat I examined the lining of my breast-pocket, where my tailor generally sewed a buckram tab bearing my name with the date—when the garment was made.

Alas! it was not there, for suddenly I recollected that a week before, in taking out my handkerchief, I had found it loose and torn it out.

"I have nothing with me, I fear," I said; "but if you will telephone to my servant, Phelps, he will at once come and identify me."

"Too late to-night," was his reply. "Make yourself quite comfortable here until the morning, when you shall have full opportunity of seeing your man."

"I cannot stay in this house," I declared. "Besides—why should I?"

"Because, my dear sir, it is necessary," was the elderly man's reply. "I assure you that no harm will befall you if you will only accept the situation, and act as we request."

"You are in conspiracy with this man!" I cried, pointing to Janesco. "You have trapped me here—into the hands of my enemy."

"My dear Sebright," he said, with an air of unconcern, "I am not your enemy. Why should I be, after our long friendship?"

"Friendship?" I echoed. "Have you taken leave of your senses, man—or am I dreaming?" and I drew my hand across my brow.

"Come, that is enough," said the man in black. "Let us take you up to your room for the night. At ten o'clock to-morrow morning you shall go and see your servant, when he will, of course, identify you as Dr. Vesey, and the matter will end."

"But I don't see the object of this grim comedy!" I exclaimed. "What does it all mean?"

"It means that we are acting for your own benefit, my dear sir," was the elderly man's response. "For your own welfare." And they made a move towards the door, outside which I saw standing two other men, muscular and rather rough-looking, though well-dressed.

I refused flatly to ascend the red-carpeted stairs, declaring that I should complain to the police of illegal detention.

I turned towards the front door in an endeavour to make a bolt for it, but in an instant I was seized by both men, who had apparently been awaiting me, and being lifted off my feet was forced up the stairs, shouting angrily the while.

Imagine my mad fury at such treatment. I yelled for assistance, hoping to arouse the neighbours, and on entering the back bedroom on the first floor, I took up the toilet-jug and flung it with all my force at the shuttered window, in order to attract attention from without.

The crash resounded through the house.

In my frantic despair I seized a chair and, placing it before me, rushed at one of my captors. But alas! he was too quick for me, and next moment I found myself pinned down upon the floor.

Soon I realised the utter futility of resistance in face of such force, therefore, after a long argument with the two men—who would give me no satisfaction as to who they were—I cast myself upon the bed, fully dressed as I was, and towards dawn dozed off to sleep.

When I awoke, some coffee was brought to me, and in a couple of hours the door opened, revealing Janesco standing with the bald-headed man of the previous night.

The latter wished me a polite good-morning, inquired how I had slept, and then said—

"I have a taxi below. If you still persist, we will drive to Argyll Road and see your servant."

"Certainly," I cried, in quick enthusiasm, and in a few moments had washed my face and made myself presentable.

Then we all descended, and with the two men who had remained with me through the night, and

the old gentleman, we entered a taxi and drove to the address I gave.

"Phelps will quickly tell you that you've made a huge mistake in thinking I am the man Sebright," I laughed, as we were whisked along down the Bayswater Road. "But I do wish, sir," I said, addressing the old gentleman, "that you would tell me the meaning of all this."

"You shall know everything later," he said. "I merely wish to satisfy myself that your statement is correct."

Presently we swung round from the High Street, Kensington, at that hour of the morning full of bustle and movement, into the quiet respectability of Argyll Road, and quickly pulled up before my house.

I descended, followed by the others, and ascending the steps, rang the bell.

I heard a footstep in the hall, and next moment the door was thrown open by a tall, dark, clean-shaven man in black, who looked at me inquiringly.

He was a perfect stranger!

"Where's Phelps?" I asked of him, greatly taken aback.

"I know no such name, sir," was the man's reply.

"What right have you in my house?" I demanded, for I saw by the hall that I had not mistaken my own door.

"This is not your house, sir, excuse me. My

master is Dr. Vesey. He went out half an hour ago."

"What?" I shrieked; "are you mad, fellow?"

"One moment," interrupted the old gentleman at my side; "how long have you been in Dr. Vesey's service?"

"Five years, sir."

"And do you recognise this gentleman as Dr. Vesey?"

"I've never seen him before in my life, sir," was the man's reply. "The doctor has only just gone out."

I stood staring at the fellow, speechless, rooted to the spot.

CHAPTER XIII

THE TOMB OF HOPE

I RAISED my voice in protest, but the neatly dressed man-servant, who looked the pink of respectability, remained quite inexorable, calmly denying all knowledge of me.

Words failed me. Where was Phelps?

I glanced around my own hall and made a movement to enter, but the two men instantly prevented me.

Again I protested. I appealed to the taxi-driver, nevertheless, he sat in his seat immovable, without responding.

"Come," exclaimed the elderly man, who had accompanied us, "this is sufficient!" Then, turning to the pair, said: "You may go. Tell them that the necessary papers will follow in an hour or so."

I looked him full in the face and asked—

"What do you mean, sir, by not allowing me to enter my own house?"

"This is not your house, Mr. Sebright. Has not the servant refused you admittance? He has never seen you before in his life," replied the man sternly.

"I tell you that I am not Sebright, and that this house is mine—*my own*!" I shouted.

Whereupon the door was slammed in our faces.

I looked eagerly up and down, to see if any one were about who could recognise me. But alas! the road was deserted save for a butcher's cart disappearing furiously round the corner into Upper Phillimore Gardens.

Then my captors unceremoniously hustled me back into the taxi, leaving the elderly man standing upon the pavement.

I shrieked in protest. I cried for help, and a boy, full of curiosity, appeared from nowhere.

"Tell somebody to come here and help me, boy," I shouted. "Call me a constable!"

Next instant my heart leapt for joy, for a constable, hearing my cries, came briskly around the corner from Durham Villas, nearly opposite.

He was met, however, by the elderly man, whom he appeared to recognise, for he at once saluted respectfully. The man spoke to him in a single word—which caused him to halt and stand.

I leaned forward out of the window, calling frantically for assistance, but the constable remained standing where he was, in conversation with the man who had brought me there.

Next moment the taxi had started down the hill into High Street, where we swung round to the right, in the direction of Hammersmith.

I yelled to passers-by as we went swiftly along the

broad thoroughfare, past the end of Addison Road, and over the railway bridge. People turned in surprise, but no one offered to help me or inquire the reason of my appeal.

Amazing, that a man could be so completely held captor in the midst of teeming London. My two stalwart companions would give me no explanation. One sat at my side, and the other directly before me. Both held my wrists, lest I should leap out. I had struggled, but so muscular were they that I had been compelled to give up resistance.

In that cold, grey morning all seemed chill and hopeless. People whom I passed were muffled to the ears and heeded not my appealing cries.

Swiftly we went on, past Hammersmith, Broadway Station, along King Street, and through Chiswick. They were taking me out into the country.

Through the narrow, uncleanly High Street of Brentford, that town of gas-works, soap-works, Thames mud, and evil smells, we rushed as quickly as the traffic would allow. I recognised it, for I had often motored through it on my way to the Bath Road. Beyond, we came to bare, black trees, and green fields, and passing the ornamental gates of Sion House, suddenly turned off to the left into quaint, old-world Isleworth, where the big iron gates of a large, old-fashioned house opened as we swung through them upon a well-kept drive. Afterwards the gates closed behind us with a heavy clang.

My captors descended, and I followed, protesting vehemently the while.

Then, for the first time, the horrible truth dawned upon me. As I crossed the threshold into that bare, tiled hall, devoid of any vestige of furniture, I was met by a short, dapper little man of professional air, who, after a whispered word with one of the men who had accompanied me, came forward to greet me.

"I am extremely glad you have come to visit me—er—Dr. Vesey," he said in a pleasant voice. "I hope your stay with us will be a pleasant one, and beneficial."

"I realise now, for the first time, the cleverness of the dastardly conspiracy against me," I said, addressing him. "I have no ill-feeling towards you, sir. I know quite well that this is a home—in plain language, a private asylum for the insane. And I have been consigned here by certain enemies who fear that I have ascertained a truth — the truth concerning the assassination of an unfortunate young man in Kensington.

"Yes," he said, with the intention of humouring me. "It is most fortunate. But pray be patient, and all will be well. You will have your opportunity of revenge some day."

I saw that this was one of his set phrases in dealing with complaining patients. His manner was kindly, but I knew from the way in which he regarded me that he judged me as what I had been certified to be —a man not responsible for his actions.

With him I passed into a business-like room, where he opened a big register, and questioning me, took down my replies. That he was a medical man was apparent. He took no notice of either protest or threat, but pursued his inquiries—those laid down by law—without allowing any interruption.

Then two evil-looking attendants, whose faces bore the impress of undue indulgence in alcohol, entered and conducted me to a room on the first floor.

My quarters proved not uncomfortable—a combined bedroom and sitting-room, plainly furnished, its barred window looking out upon the broad lawn bounded by a high old red-brick wall that was half covered by ivy and surmounted by large, ugly iron spikes.

Left alone I stood gazing around, wondering who had been the last unfortunate occupant of that apartment — some poor demented man had lived there for years perhaps, and had probably died there, causing the vacancy now filled by myself. About the room were a number of quaint personal possessions, a strange assortment of odds and ends, broken pipes, pieces of wood rudely carved, remarkably grotesque designs in red and black inks drawn upon the pale blue wall-paper—traced by the hand of one insane—the weird imaginations of a disordered mind.

I cast myself into the old wicker arm-chair and reflected. I saw it all now. That alert man in black and his bibulous but silent companion had

been medical men, while the bald-headed man who had spoken with such authority and who had been recognised by the constable in Argyll Road, was a stipendiary magistrate—the trio necessary to consign me to that living tomb!

I had been alleged insane by Janesco, who, by some subtle means, had contrived to get rid of Phelps and install in his place one of his gang as a man-servant.

By what clever device, I wondered, had that been accomplished? The whole plot showed a cunning that was marvellous. There could be but one motive for it all. I had been captured and now held powerless, with my story discredited, because I had been friendly with Xenia—because I had promised to render her assistance against her enemies.

I blamed myself for not being more wary. I saw how my actions had been misconstrued, how my anger had been regarded as madness, and how my story had been viewed by the two doctors and the magistrate as the wild statement of a lunatic.

But why had I been addressed as Sebright? Who could be the unfortunate man whose identity had been placed upon me by my enemies?

I recollected that that morning was the twentieth of the month. The appointment had been made at the Hotel Danieli, in Venice, for the twenty-fourth. Held captive there I could not keep it as I had intended. What could I do?

Filled with indignation I rose and paced the room, the door of which had been locked. Confined there under a magistrate's order, what hope was there now for me? Perhaps Phelps was already back home again, in utter ignorance of what had occurred. He and his wife had probably been enticed out, and the clever trick played in their absence.

Surely the whole plot displayed a deep and double cunning, which showed the ingenuity of the persons against whom I had now to fight.

My most judicious course, no doubt, was to remain patient and watch opportunity for escape. Violence or angry protest would, I knew, only bring upon me an unceasing vigilance, for the laws for regulating private asylums are so strict that the director is responsible for the personal well-being of those beneath his care.

From my window I saw two men pass, the facial expression of both betraying that they were idiots. One was carrying a boy's kite manufactured from newspaper. I heard a man shouting and groaning somewhere, and following came a loud peal of idiotic laughter.

But, summoning courage, I resolved to remain calm.

Of the attendant who brought me my luncheon on a tray I inquired by whose request I had been placed there. I promised him a bribe if he would tell me. Later that day he looked in and said that

he had ascertained that the request had been lodged by my cousin—somebody named Sebright, living at Lancaster Gate.

"Look here," I cried, "I am as sane as you are. I have no cousin named Sebright. I've been placed here by enemies who fear that I may tell what I know."

The dark-bearded man, whose name was Elliot, smiled incredulously. That was not the first time a similar allegation had been made to him by a patient. Now that I had been certified as insane it was, I saw, hopeless to argue or to make any statement. I had merely to accept the amazing situation until such time as I could regain my liberty.

Confinement there was galling. Thoughts of that appointment in Venice, which, if I was to solve the problem, I must keep, arose within me each hour and drove me to despair.

If I could only communicate with Captain Janesco, or with Xenia—ah, if only I could!

I tried to read in order to distract my thoughts. The man Elliot entered and, finding me quiet, sat down and chatted.

To impress him that I was quite sane I talked to him of the political situation, and discussed with him certain proposals made in Parliament. He listened and chatted with me, smoking the cigar I offered him from my case.

Presently, however, quite unconsciously, I touched

upon that subject uppermost in my mind—the affair at Kensington—whereupon he smiled, interrupting quickly—

"Yes, doctor; I quite understand. I know all about the affair. Let's talk of something else. I know it's one of your pet subjects, isn't it?"

I looked the man straight in the face, for I saw instantly that he had been informed upon what particular point I was adjudged crazy.

I said no more. He smoked out his cigar and, rising, left me for the night. Till ten o'clock I sat beside the meagre fire reading—held a prisoner in that place—until the electric light suddenly went out. Then I still sat in the fireglow, pondering and wondering.

More than once loud shouts of hilarious laughter reached my ears, the merriment of some poor imbecile. Truly, to a sane man, that place was full of horrors. How many other men and women, though perfectly sane, had been consigned to a similar fate by the evil machinations of their enemies? About such institutions the environment, the close confinement, nay, the very atmosphere, seems to disturb the mental balance even of those whose senses are perfectly normal.

That dark night was to me full of terror. I fell asleep, and my wild dreams were of the woman who had so suddenly and so entirely possessed my senses—the mysterious Xenia.

Next day passed uneventfully. I thought that my

enemies had triumphed, and that I should be prevented from keeping observation upon the hotel in Venice on the day of the appointment.

But next night proved one of the most exciting within my experience.

CHAPTER XIV

THE FATEFUL TWENTY-FOURTH

IT struck me as curious, now that I reflect upon all the extraordinary circumstances, that my enemies, if they had wished to rid themselves of me, might easily have entrapped me to some unoccupied house and killed me, just as the unfortunate young man had been served in Argyll Road.

I argued, therefore, that they wished to get me out of the way for the time being, and that, after a certain date, they would have no further fear.

I reviewed the whole situation. The date, I decided, was that of the appointment in Venice, and it was intended that Xenia should not live as a perpetual menace. With her lips closed they would not fear me further.

The malefactors were both desperate and full of ingenuity. That much was quite certain.

Though my blood boiled, yet by dint of great effort I remained quite calm, and as evening drew on pretended to doze in my chair, much to the satisfaction of my attendant Elliot, whose respect, I saw, I had already won, for of the little money I had in my pocket I had given him a sovereign.

At ten o'clock my light went out as usual, but, stirring my fire, I lit another cigar—procured for me by Elliot earlier in the day—and sat wakeful, with ears strained to catch the many weird and horrifying sounds which break the stillness of night in such a place.

The clock of the ancient church of Isleworth, down by the river, chimed hour after hour, until it was two o'clock. Then, rising quietly, I went to the window, and drawing up the red holland blind noiselessly, peered forth into the darkness. The wind was blowing furiously, and black clouds were drifting quickly across the moon.

From beneath my mattress I took a piece of hoop-iron about six inches long, which, earlier in the day, I had removed from the wooden coal-bucket—which had once been a lard-tub—and by the aid of the fire I had succeeded in fashioning it into an improvised screw-driver. Noiselessly I opened the window and then set to work to unscrew one of the heavy iron bars which were placed horizontally across it.

The effort in the darkness was full of difficulty, for I had to put my arm outside and work left-handedly. For a long time, indeed, I made no impression upon the screw, so deeply was it rusted into its socket. But by long patience and perseverance I was at last able to move it, and at length succeeded in removing it.

A second and a third were more quickly removed,

until, after an hour's work, I had been able to take out two of the bars and found myself outside kneeling upon the wide window-sill, which, for the whole day, I had been covertly examining.

Close by was an iron rain-water pipe, and could I but cling on to it I might be able to slide down to the ground. As a boy, I had been an expert in climbing trees after birds' nests, and even now but little of my agility had left me. Thoughts of Xenia impelled me. I was working for her sake—perhaps, indeed, to save her life!

So, leaning forward, I waited until the rough wind abated somewhat, and then, trusting to good fortune, swung myself clear of the window-sill, and gripping the pipe with hands and knees, slid slowly and noiselessly down to the ground.

My heart beat so loudly that, as I stood upon the lawn to regain breath, I could hear it.

Creeping to the wall I soon scaled it by means of the ivy, and, clearing the iron spikes, dropped on the other side into the road, a free man.

Free!

Hatless, and without overcoat, I ran along the dark, badly lit road beneath the high wall, and, finding the tram-lines, followed them until I gained the main road from Hounslow to London.

A clock, chiming somewhere, told me that it was half-past three. I passed one constable on the canal bridge at the entrance to Brentford, and he looked askance at me without a hat. But as I

was then only walking briskly—though I had been running a minute or two before—he did not stop me, thinking, no doubt, that I was only one of those many "cranks" which policemen on night-duty so often meet.

Light of foot, and eager to return home, I went on until I reached the Star and Garter at Kew, and then through Gunnersbury and Chiswick to Hammersmith, until, just before five, I turned into Argyll Road and pulled vigorously at my own door bell.

I was a long time before I could make any one hear, and as I stood on the top step I wondered whom I should meet—a friend in Phelps, or a foe in the man who had, in such unaccountable manner, usurped his place.

At last I heard a movement in the hall. Slowly the door was unchained, and as it fell open I saw, to my delight, that Phelps himself stood there.

"Lor', sir," he gasped, "I 'ad no idea it was you. We've been very worried about you."

"Ah! And well you may have been, Phelps," I said. "Look at me! No coat, no hat—and I've walked all the way home from Isleworth."

"Well, sir, the wife an' I thought that something had 'appened to you. You never came home the other night," the old man added, as he followed me into my den.

"Listen, Phelps," I said. "Tell me what occurred here the day before yesterday."

"Occurred here, sir?" he echoed. "Nothing, sir."

"But you were not here in the morning. I called, and you and your wife were out."

"Yes, sir," stammered the old man; "a very funny thing happened to us, sir. I 'ad a telegram at five in the morning to say my brother, down at Chatham, was a-dyin' and askin' me and the wife to go down there. We've 'ad a lot of trouble in the family lately, sir. Well, we went out at nine o'clock, and left a note in case you came in, sir. You had your latchkey with you, we knew. But when we got down to Chatham we found my brother was quite well and away at his work at the dockyard, and that the whole thing was a cruel hoax on the part of somebody. So we came back to London at once."

"And the note?"

"It was still lyin' on your table, sir."

"And had nobody been here in the meantime?"

"No, sir, not to my knowledge," was his reply.

The truth was plain. Phelps and his wife had been got out of the way by the fictitious telegram, whereupon some stranger had entered the house with a latchkey — my own latchkey, abstracted from my pocket, most probably—and posed before the magistrate as the man-servant.

My first impulse was to seek the magistrate, and put before him the plain truth, but on glancing at my table I saw by the calendar that the date was the twenty-second of the month.

The appointment in Venice was fixed for the day after to-morrow!

I took down the Continental Bradshaw, and found that if I left Charing Cross that morning at nine, I should arrive in Venice at midnight on the morrow by travelling by way of Brussels and Bâle.

Therefore, while I had a bath and changed, Phelps hurriedly packed my traps, and Mrs. Phelps prepared my breakfast. I happened to have fifty pounds in notes in the house, and taking them, I left in a taxi at eight o'clock, giving instructions to Phelps not to leave the house on any account till my return.

The journey across from the Channel to the Adriatic was the usual monotony of a crowded wagon-restaurant and a stuffy wagon-lit, but at last, after the final run across the long bridge over the wide lagoon, I alighted at night at the station at Venice and was quickly on board the electric launch, which there does duty for the hotel bus.

Arrival in Venice at whatever hour is always picturesque, and as we went along the canal the silence of the city was broken only by the low throbbing of our motor. On each hand rose gloomy medieval palaces, dark and mysterious, while the ever-burning lights of those water-shrines, venerated by the gondoliers, scintillated upon the waters.

Now and then the sharp, warning voice of some gondolier came forth from the shadows where the tiny head-light of his long funereal-looking craft shone in the blackness pale as a firefly on a summer's night.

The air, though cold, was refreshing after nearly

forty hours on the railway, but very quickly I found myself in the big square hall of the Danieli, with its many little cane-tables and chairs—that big lounge in which I had sat on many previous occasions.

Twice had I been in Venice before, therefore it was scarcely new to me. I registered in the name of Vernon, and then ascended the lift to my room.

No one was about, for it was half-past one in the morning. For that I was thankful, because I wished to make my own inquiries ere my enemies, whoever they might be, were afforded opportunity of detecting my presence.

Fagged out by the journey, I must have slept heavily, but when the waiter brought me my coffee in the morning I sent word down to the secretary, asking him to come and see me.

The frock-coated young Austrian entered, and, at my request, brought for my inspection the list of the hundred and fifty or so guests in the hotel. Each name I carefully examined. They were of all nationalities, but not one conveyed to me anything resembling that of Gallini. Without a doubt the persons who were to meet there would, like myself, use fictitious names. Yet I recollected distinctly that Gallini was the name.

"The fact is," I said in explanation, "I am in search of a lady," and I then described Xenia.

"I know of no one staying with us answering that description, sir," was his courteous reply in good English. "Of course, we have a great many visitors,

and some of them I do not see. I may be off duty when they come to take their rooms."

So from him I could learn nothing.

When he had gone, I stood at the window gazing idly down upon the quaint old Venezia, Queen of the Adriatic, the wide quay below, and the steamboat pier, the crowd of black gondolas rising and falling with the waters, and the wide, sunny canal; San Marco, with the cupola of San Giorgio Maggiore, rising upon the small island opposite.

On the quay, before the hotel, one of the busiest thoroughfares, the interesting bustle of Venetian life had commenced, the gondoliers in their quaint hats, the Venetian girls in their black shawls, the fishermen, and that never-ceasing crowd of cosmopolitan tourists who, year in and year out, Baedekers in hand, climb the Ponte della Paglia and gaze upon that fraudulent "lion" the Bridge of Sighs.

I hesitated what to do. Now that I had satisfied myself that no person named Gallini was staying there, there was nothing to prevent me descending and watching from some point unseen.

So I dressed, and at ten o'clock descended to the lounge, which I found crowded, as usual, by the travelling American and English, mostly information-seeking Cookites of the better class—people who are somebodies at home, but nobodies in Venice.

I looked around, half expecting to see my enemy of Cambridge Street, but I distinguished nobody I had ever seen before.

Throughout the morning I idled in the winter sunshine about the Riva degli Schiavoni, in the neighbourhood of the hotel, and walked as far as the famed Piazza San Marco, where tourists were feeding the flocks of pigeons and being photographed in the act. I wandered through the beautiful church, admired the golden mosaics, and strolled under the long colonnades of that square which is one of the most noted in the world. I watched the work on the new Campanile, and lounged into the courtyard of the historic ducal palace. But you who know Venice, know well the life of the visitor there, the tempting windows of the souvenir-shops, the modern paintings and the false antiques offered one on every hand.

In preference to lunching at the crowded table d'hôte, and there courting recognition, I took my *collazione* at an obscure Italian *trattoria* I knew, called "Il Vapore"—or Steamboat—where I ate toothsome Venetian dishes, washed down by a quarter-flask of the red *chianti* of Tuscany.

At three o'clock I again re-entered the hotel, and after a glance through the public rooms, ascended to my own, where I wrote some letters.

Perhaps Captain Janesco would keep the appointment! That thought suddenly occurred to me as I wrote, and laying down my pen I sat staring straight before me.

It was half-past five when I again descended and went through to the small bar for a cocktail. The

day was passing. Perhaps the mysterious appointment had been cancelled! I had swallowed my *martini* and was turning to go back into the lounge, when across the big hall I saw a smartly dressed young man pass, accompanied by a tall and fashionably attired and rather handsome young woman.

I caught sight of the man's clearly cut profile beneath the electric light, and halted amazed, breathless.

It was that of the fair-haired young man-servant who had admitted me at Cambridge Street—the man who so strangely resembled the unfortunate victim in Argyll Road!

I hurried forward, and was able to catch a glance of the woman. She was about twenty-five, with dark hair and refined features—evidently Italian.

They ascended together by the lift, laughing as they went, unconscious of my presence. And when they had disappeared I eagerly inquired of the hall-porter who they were.

"The young man is a new arrival to-day, sare," he responded in broken English. "He is a very rich young man, a millionaire, they say—Count Gallini, of Rome. He has the large first-floor suite."

"And the lady?"

"Ah, sare, I do not know her. She is not staying here. She lives at another hotel, I believe."

"Is the Count alone?" I asked.

"No, sare. He has a friend with him—a man. I do not know his name."

Gallini was there! The secret tryst was being kept—but with whom?

I turned away, resolved at all hazards to watch and ascertain the nature of the sinister business now in progress.

Where, I wondered, was Xenia? Was she in some deadly peril?

That secret meeting was a sequel to the affair in Argyll Road.

CHAPTER XV

THE STATEMENT OF THE STRANGER

DURING the next half-hour I remained watchful and vigilant.

The suite of rooms occupied by the young man-servant, whom I had mistaken for a German on account of his fairness of complexion, was the most expensive in the hotel. It had, I discovered, been secured ten days before, and Count Gallini had been accompanied by a man who, half an hour after arrival, had gone forth and not yet returned.

The lady had called for the Count, who had apparently awaited her arrival, and they both had gone up to the sitting-room together. What secret business had she with him?

I ascended to the corridor, and stood outside the door, trying to catch their conversation, but only low, indistinct words could I hear.

With what object was that long-arranged meeting being held? Who was this mysterious dark-haired girl, and what could be her connection with the tragic affair in Argyll Road?

Strong suspicion seized me that the man Janesco

—the scoundrel with those round, haunting eyes—might be somewhere in the vicinity.

I could not well intrude upon the pseudo-Count and his lady-friend, therefore I descended again and idled in the lounge, eager and watchful for the coming of Gallini's companion. Already I had arranged with the hall-porter to nod across to me if he entered.

Grave doubts arose within me that all the elaborate precaution of incarcerating me in that horrible institution at Isleworth had been in order to prevent me keeping that appointment in Venice, and watching the progress of events. As I sat idling over the *Tribuna*, smoking a cigarette, I wondered where Xenia could be. Did she know of this appointment? It had been sent to her, but she had never received the message. I had not given it to her. Yet perhaps from some other source she knew of it. Perhaps, after all, she would keep it!

My heart beat quickly as I sat beneath one of the big palms, pretending to be engrossed in my newspaper, yet with eyes riveted upon the doorway opening to the quay.

The most mysterious point in the situation at that moment was the strange resemblance of Count Gallini with the man I had found lying dead in Mrs. Kynaston's house in Argyll Road. Was the likeness accidental—or was it assumed? If the latter, then for what reason?

The object of that meeting, whatever it could be, was, I felt, a sinister one. The person to whom the

telephone message was addressed was not to approach the Count without previous signal. Some great interest was certainly at stake, or surely my unknown enemies would not have taken the infinite trouble in conniving to certify me insane, merely because Xenia had sought my aid.

There was much more behind the strange affair than I had ever imagined—a problem that was utterly beyond solution.

I suppose I must have been watching for nearly an hour when, of a sudden, the page-boy on duty at the door threw it open, and a man in a well-cut overcoat entered—the man with those round, out-standing eyes.

The hall-porter, seated in his box, glanced across at me and nodded, whereupon I buried my face in my paper, while my enemy passed close by me in entire ignorance of my presence, and entered the lift to the Count's apartments.

What should I do? My first object was to conceal my presence. Evidently the man was not yet aware of my escape from Isleworth, therefore, by watching, I might probably discover some key to the problem.

Again I passed the Count's door with open ear. A heated discussion was proceeding in Italian—a language that I knew fairly well. I heard the woman's voice protesting in English, and I recognised it to be that same voice that I had heard in the dining-room at Cambridge Street.

The woman was being urged to do something against her will. I heard her exclaim quite distinctly in English—

"No; I will not—once and for all, that is my decision!"

The same trio were there as had been in Cambridge Street! The person they were expecting had not yet arrived.

So again I descended into the lounge, where, close to where I had previously been seated, I noticed a tall, reddish-bearded, extremely gentlemanly looking man lounging, smoking a cigar and apparently interested in nothing.

I had not seen him before, and instantly I was filled with suspicion that this elegant person was the fourth conspirator—the person for whom they were waiting.

As I strolled towards the outer door he raised his brown eyes to mine, but only for a second, then he dropped them again.

He was, I saw, tall, athletic, well-dressed, and refined, probably Austrian or Hungarian, about forty-five, and evidently a gentleman.

Suddenly another thought occurred to me. Had that mysterious appointment been made with the man who had entered my house and so suddenly expired? Surely that could not be, for the culprits must have read of the tragic discovery.

I saw that the red-bearded man was covertly watching me, while I, on my part, was awaiting the

sign by which he would be allowed to approach the Count.

By various pretexts I passed and repassed through the lounge, yet the stranger remained there quite unconcerned, waiting in patience for somebody who did not come.

Suddenly, as my back was turned, the big swing-door opened, and I heard a female voice inquire for Count Gallini.

I turned quickly, and to my delight saw Xenia herself, dressed smartly in furs, standing with the gold-laced hall-porter.

I was about to rush across to her, but next second drew back. On mature thought I realised that I might be of greater service to her if, for the present, I remained unseen. So I concealed myself behind one of the large columns in the lounge, while I watched a page-boy conduct her to the lift.

At last I had found her!

The instant she had disappeared the red-bearded man rose, put his cigar into an ash-tray, and walking straight up to me, exclaimed in very good English—

"Dr. Vesey, I believe?"

I started in surprise and admitted that such was my name.

"Ah, of course you do not know me, doctor," he said, with extreme courtesy. "I will introduce myself. I am Paul Mordacq, Colonel of the Imperial Austrian Army."

"And how were you aware of my name?" I inquired.

"Well," he laughed, "I discovered that Mr. Vernon in the hotel-book and Dr. Vesey of London, were identical—that is all."

I viewed him with considerable suspicion. He was, no doubt, another of that desperate gang into whose hands I had so innocently fallen in London. I had not failed to notice how, in passing, Xenia had cast at him a curious look, half of recognition.

What could it mean?

"No doubt you regard me—a perfect stranger—as an enemy, doctor, especially after what has happened," said Colonel Mordacq, with exquisite politeness. He had drawn himself up with military erectness and stood with his heels together as he bowed. "But," he added, "I am desirous of proving to you that I am a friend."

"Of whom?"

"Of yours, and of—of the young lady who has just passed and whom we both have recognised."

"I cannot see why you should be any friend of mine," I said, much puzzled as I looked into his refined face.

"One may have secret friends sometimes," he remarked, with a smile, as we stood together in a corner of the lounge by the window, which looked out upon the canal.

I was still suspicious. I recollected how grossly

I had been deceived by that telephone message in London.

He saw my hesitancy and added—

"I am aware of a good many of the facts, doctor. You fell into some trap or other, and only by sheer good fortune were able to be present here to-day, I believe—eh?"

"Which is perhaps scarcely agreeable to you?"

"I fear you are still regarding me as an enemy—not as a friend," he said, with a curious smile.

"If you were a friend of mademoiselle then you would surely be present and protect her from her enemies," I replied. "She is upstairs with them."

"How do you know they are not her friends?"

"Well—she would scarcely have assassins as friends," I said curtly.

"And what is your intention, then?"

"My intention is to go upstairs and face them—to denounce the false Count Gallini, and to hand over the man Janesco to the Venice police."

"Janesco? He is not here."

"That man with the prominent eyes whom I met coming from a certain house in London after a crime had been committed—the man who accompanied Gallini here."

"He is not Janesco—but Michel Chiquard. You have, I believe, met Captain Janesco—with mademoiselle. No, Dr. Vesey; to act as you suggest would surely be to create a public scandal which, in mademoiselle's case, must at all hazards be

avoided. A woman in her position must not allow the Press any opportunity of throwing mud, you know."

"Why?" I protested. "A man has been killed in London, and those men at this moment upstairs are implicated in the crime."

"I do not deny that. But no complaint must be lodged with the police. Understand that! A single word would cause a terrible scandal throughout Europe — nay, throughout the world," he replied very gravely.

"If you favour hushing-up the affair, then I shall consider you to be one of the conspirators," I said bluntly.

He shrugged his shoulders as he smiled.

"My dear sir," he said, "I can only repeat that I am acting in the interests of mademoiselle and of yourself as her friend. She has told me of the great service which you rendered her, and of her narrow escape from her enemy—the man who died suddenly in your house."

"Ah, I knew! That man called at my door with evil intent. I want to see her — to ask full explanation."

"That will not be difficult. You have, however, to give me your word of honour as a gentleman not to relate what you may see or learn to a single living soul. It must all be kept a profound secret from the world."

"Why all this mystery?"

"Because, in the interests of certain persons—persons upon whom there must be no suspicion of scandal or of double-dealing—the truth must never be revealed to the public," he said. "I beg your services, if you will consent to give them—or rather, mademoiselle wants them. You can assist her in a very great degree—nay, you can, if you will, save her, perhaps save her life."

"Save her life?" I echoed. "How?"

"She will explain. Give me your promise of entire secrecy, and you shall see her. I am not seeking to mislead you," he assured me, looking straight into my eyes. "I am only acting as her protector—and yours."

"If you require a pledge of secrecy, I will give it willingly," was my reply. "But I do not like the thought of her being alone with that desperate pair. Why is the appointment being held here?"

"In order to settle a certain affair that is in dispute."

"And the other woman—who is she?"

"A friend of mademoiselle's."

"My own idea is to call in a commissary of police and to relate to him the whole story as far as I know it," I said. "Our English police, you must not forget, are in active search of the intruders in that house in Kensington."

"I am well aware of that, but as I have already pointed out, my dear sir, any appeal to the police must reflect upon mademoiselle—and cause a

scandal so terrible that it would be impossible for her to face it."

"Are the Count and his friend aware of your presence here?" I asked quickly.

"Certainly not. I am entirely unknown to them. I arrived from Budapest only a couple of hours ago — to keep the appointment, as you yourself have done."

"And have you no fear on mademoiselle's account —now that she is with them?"

"None whatever. They are in complete ignorance that I am watching—that, in fact, the net is already spread for them. I only ask your co-operation in this very delicate matter, doctor. Nay, I beg it on behalf of mademoiselle. She will perhaps ask you to act strangely — to perform some service which may seem extraordinary. But in her interests you will act as she directs—that is, if you are really her devoted friend, as you have assured her."

CHAPTER XVI

THE PALACE OF THE DOGE

COLONEL MORDACQ was no ordinary person. He combined the elegance of a dandy with the air of a diplomat, while his manner was one of deep earnestness and convincing thoroughness of purpose. That deep, piercing look in his brown eyes seemed to fathom my innermost thoughts.

"I think we had best leave this place," he said, after a few moments. "It is not judicious to be seen. When mademoiselle leaves them she will join me. She does not know yet that you are in Venice. The surprise for her will, of course, be a pleasant one."

"But if we go out the Count and his friends may escape."

"I think not," was his slow reply. "Mademoiselle will remain in touch with them. They are her friends, remember. Come, let's go."

"If they are her friends, how can they be our enemies?"

"Wait and receive her explanation," was my companion's calm response, as, putting on his soft

felt hat and buttoning his overcoat, he accompanied me out upon the quay.

Before us, bobbing up and down with the tide, were a number of long black gondolas, each with its tiny light in the heavy, old-fashioned lantern, and into one of them he stepped, I following mechanically.

The tall, black-haired gondolier with the broad-brimmed hat and crimson sash was, I saw, a private servant, and I seated myself upon soft velvet cushions. Whither we were going I knew not; indeed, as soon as we had pushed off I regretted that I had been induced to thus relinquish my post of vantage. Was I about to fall into a second trap?

Passing beneath the long wall of the Royal Gardens we entered the broad Grand Canal, and shooting beneath the Ponte di Ferro entered that wide watery way which, flanked by huge medieval palaces on either side, is like no other thoroughfare in all the world.

In some windows lights were burning, and over some steps gas shone in the antique lanterns, casting long reflections upon the rippling waters. Ever and anon our man ejaculated a warning "a-oel," awakening echoes of the dark arches and side canals. What strange tales those mute, water-worn walls could tell of the luxury and splendour of the Doges, the cruelties of the Council of Ten, the secret denunciations and the dastardly assassinations and

poisonings of the innocent under the Doges Dandolo and Contarini.

Soon after the point by the great Palazzo Balbi, where the canal makes a wide sweep round, our gondola drew up before the steps of a splendid palace of the early Renaissance, one of the finest in Venice, where, by the light of the three great lanterns outside, I read over the great arched door the motto—"*Non nobis, Domine, non nobis.*"

"We will await mademoiselle here," said the Colonel, as he stepped out. And ere my foot was ashore the big doors were thrown open, revealing a great well-lit hall of marble, cosy with crimson rugs, and hung with huge antique paintings.

Two men in bright blue livery, with rosettes of yellow and black upon their shoulders, bowed low before us as we entered, and then closed the door behind us. And as I walked at Mordacq's side, I realised that whoever lived there must be of the highest nobility.

At the end was a wide marble staircase, which we ascended, and gaining the first floor entered a huge salon, the four long windows of which looked forth upon the canal. Upon the walls were great paintings of the old masters and splendid tapestries, while each of the gilt chairs covered with dark crimson damask bore upon their backs a princely coronet embroidered in gold thread and tarnished by centuries of wear. I gazed around upon the magnificent old furniture, reflected upon the weird stories I had read

of how, in some of those old Venetian palaces, a portion of the floor of the principal salon had been constructed to open suddenly and precipitate the unwary into the dungeons below, or, indeed, into a watery grave. It was a way in which the Venetian nobility of the Renaissance rid themselves of obnoxious persons.

Perhaps in that great gilded room such tragedies had happened in the old days when people were unscrupulous where their enemies were concerned.

At each end of the huge apartment great wood-fires roared and crackled upon the ponderous brass dogs, while around the walls were sculptured, and upon the long windows were blazoned, many princely coats of arms.

"What palace is this?" I inquired, as I gazed around in wonder.

"The Palazzo Cusani-Visconti—Andrea Visconti was Doge in 1527," replied my companion.

"Does mademoiselle reside here?"

"Temporarily only; but when she comes she will explain," and, raising his hand, he rang a bell.

Another man in the same bright blue livery and white silk stockings appeared. To him the Colonel said in Italian—

"As soon as the Signorina returns, tell her I am here."

"Yes, Signor Colonello," replied the man, bowing low and walking backwards as he reclosed the long white doors.

Mordacq seated himself in the window and motioned me to one of the long, high-backed chairs, saying—

"I think, perhaps, we might have a little confidential chat, doctor—that is, if you will accept my assurance that I am really not an enemy," he laughed amusedly.

"I have already accepted that assertion," was my response, "and I am ready to listen to anything you may tell me."

"Well, it is not very much that I can tell you," he said. "The fact is——"

Hardly had the words fallen from his lips than the long white doors reopened, and a tall, dark-haired young girl in pale blue tripped in. She was not more than seventeen, and wore upon her hair a great bow of black silk. Her well-cut, regular features were handsome, and her air was one of irresponsible merriment.

"Hulloa, Colonel Mordacq!" she cried in very good English. "I didn't know you were back. The messenger, Hernfeld, is below, waiting to see you. I passed him in the hall. I'll ring;" and she did so. Then she raised her eyes shyly and looked across at me inquiringly.

"This is Dr. Vesey, of London," he said, introducing me with a wave of the hand, "—er—Mademoiselle Monica."

Whereupon I rose and bowed.

The man-servant entered, exclaiming inquiringly—

"You rang, Altezza?"

"Yes. Send the messenger Hernfeld up."

"Altezza!" The servant addressed the young girl as "Highness"! Whom could she be?

A moment later a smart, dark-eyed, military-looking man in a heavy, fur-lined, travelling coat entered, saluted, and handed Mordacq a letter bearing a large black seal.

"How long have you been here, Captain Hernfeld?" asked the Colonel in Italian.

"About ten minutes, sir," was the reply. "My instruction from His Majesty was to give this into your own hand, and then to place myself at your disposal."

Mordacq tore open the letter and read it, while Mademoiselle Monica stood by with an expression of eager interest upon her face.

The Colonel bit his lip, frowned slightly, and crushed the letter in his hand. Then, with a sigh, he dismissed the messenger, telling him that he would see him later.

And the man clicked his heels together, saluted, and withdrew.

"Well?" asked the girl breathlessly, the instant the messenger had gone. "What are the orders?"

"I regret, Highness, that they are strictly confidential," replied Mordacq, with exquisite courtesy, yet with firmness.

"Confidential?" she echoed disappointedly; "even from me?"

"Even from your Highness. His Majesty, the Emperor, imposes upon me the strictest secrecy."

"And Xenie? Is she not to know?" asked the girl, with a pretty pout.

"When His Majesty extends to me his confidence, I regret that I am unable to betray it," was the man's quiet reproof.

"I know. Do forgive me, Mordacq. I ought not to have pressed you, knowing so well what a true and loyal servant you are to our house."

"Of course I forgive, Highness," he laughed. "Feminine curiosity may always be excused—especially in such extraordinary circumstances as the present." And, walking to the great fire, he placed the message in the flames and watched it consume.

"Xenie must have left yesterday—a few hours before Hernfeld," remarked the girl. "I wish I were a messenger flying backwards and forwards across Europe. The life would be so much more exciting than being a Highness—which is really very poor fun after all, Mordacq."

The Colonel laughed across to me at her girlish philosophy.

Then he stood in silence looking down seriously upon the myriad lights of the canal below. He had received secret instructions from a reigning sovereign. What Emperor, I wondered? Who could be this handsome, dark-haired girl with the big bow in her hair?—a girl who so strongly resembled Xenia that there could be no doubt that they were sisters.

When she had given me another covert glance of quick inquiry, she bowed a little stiffly to me, and then slowly left the room.

"Who is she?" I inquired at once.

"A very impertinent little personage," was his smiling reply. "And, as you may have judged, sister of mademoiselle, your friend."

Then Xenia, who had given me her name as Edmonds, was of far higher station than I had ever imagined!

"Come, Colonel Mordacq," I said impatiently, "now that we are alone, may we not speak in confidence?"

"I shall be most delighted, doctor. I am glad you thoroughly understand that we are friends—not enemies," he said.

"Those two men, Chiquard and Gallini, are my enemies, and it distresses and alarms me that mademoiselle should be with them. Surely she is in deadly peril!"

"Not at this moment," he assured me. "If she were, then I should remain near her—that would be my duty. So have no uneasiness upon that score. But," he asked seriously, "if you are resolved to render us assistance, then you must send for your things from the Danieli. Do not attempt to return there or you may be recognised. At ten o'clock you must leave Venice upon a long journey."

"And my destination?"

"At present I cannot tell. It is quite uncertain.

Indeed, I do not know whether, when you know what service is required of you, that you will accede to her suggestion. It will strike you as strange—unheard of—but in her interests, that is, if you wish to serve her, it is highly necessary."

I hesitated. The problem was each moment becoming more and more complicated. To me it seemed certain that the Colonel had all along been aware of my departure from London and my arrival in Venice. Indeed, from what he had let drop, he seemed also to have been fully aware of how I had been consigned to that house of terrors at Isleworth, and how neatly I had succeeded in escaping.

"Will you clear up one point, Colonel, which puzzles me greatly?" I urged presently. "That young man who calls himself Count Gallini bears a most striking resemblance to the young man whom I saw lying dead in that unoccupied house in London. What is one to infer from that?"

He only exhibited his palms with quick gesture, significant of ignorance.

"My dear sir, there are many points in this most remarkable affair which still require elucidation," he said. "Let us never forget that you and I are not dealing with ordinary persons. We have to fight a desperate, widespread conspiracy—a carefully laid plot, which, alas! has already been practically successful. Did it concern any member of the ordinary public, or even the nobility, arrest and prosecution, if not conviction, would be an easy

matter. But the persons whom it concerns are, I may as well tell you, of the very highest station, and, therefore, all publicity in the shape of vulgar police arrest must be avoided. You—if you will only consent to assist Her Highness—can alone save the situation."

And as he uttered those words the long white-and-gold doors fell open again, and the silk-stockinged servant bowed low as a man in a smart grey overcoat advanced.

I rushed forward in eager surprise to greet him, for it was none other than Captain Janesco.

I caught a glance of Mordacq's countenance. In that instant it had changed entirely.

He was pale, agitated, and apprehensive at sight of my friend.

Was it possible that he had been misleading me all along?

I held my breath, and looked from one man to another in silence.

CHAPTER XVII

MORDACQ GROWS SUSPICIOUS

THAT Mordacq was entirely taken aback by Janesco's sudden appearance was apparent.

Yet next second he bowed, exclaiming—

"Ah, your Highness! I, indeed, am filled with regret that you should have dared to come here—to Venice—after my distinct warning! I telegraphed in cipher to you last night to Berlin, repeating my fears."

"I am here to resume my friendship with Dr. Vesey," he laughed carelessly, putting out his hand to me.

"I was unaware that the doctor was fortunate enough to have secured the friendship of His Imperial Highness, Prince Ludwig," exclaimed the Colonel, a trifle haughtily.

"I met His Imperial Highness in London as plain Captain Janesco," I said, utterly amazed.

"And you believed me to be Hungarian, on account of my assumed name!" laughed the Prince. "In England one generally goes incognito. It is usually best, especially if scandal may be

threatened." And there was a merry look in his dark eyes.

"But your Highness must not remain here another instant," cried the Colonel, with apprehension. "Fly at once—I beg of you. Take the electric launch over to the mainland at Mestre and get a car from the garage there. I will telephone and order one. Do not trust to the railway, you will be surely watched. Even now Chiquard may know of your presence here."

"And if he does, Mordacq, what then?"

"It increases the danger a thousandfold—to her and to you!" he replied quickly. "No, leave at once and go into hiding—anywhere until I can give you the signal that all danger has passed. I will advertise in the London *Times* as before."

"But why are you so solicitous of my welfare?" queried the Prince.

"I have received orders. Hernfeld brought me a dispatch this evening."

"From His Majesty?"

The Colonel nodded in the affirmative.

"He mentioned me? What did he say?"

"The message is, I regret, a confidential one, Prince," was Mordacq's quiet response. "You can be of no service here. Leave all to me, and go—for her sake."

"Very well, Mordacq," replied the Prince, with some reluctance. "I suppose I must bow to your decision. You are a marvel of cleverness and deep

cunning. No secret, however well kept, is safe from you. Therefore I leave Xenia's safety entirely in your hands." Then, turning to me, he said—

"I had hoped, doctor, to have had a long chat with you, to thank you for your services to us, and to ask you to continue them, but——"

"The doctor is here for that purpose, Prince."

"Good," he said, grasping my hand warmly. "I can only thank you and wish you every good fortune and success. Our revenge must be both swift and secret." And, wishing me a merry au revoir, the handsome man turned upon his heel and left the apartment.

Mordacq walked quickly to the end of the big room, took up a telephone instrument, got on to the little town of Mestre across the Lagoon, and ordered the highest power car in the garage.

"The gentleman will arrive in about an hour," he added. "He will want it for a long run, so send a good mechanic, and see that some food and wine are put in. The gentleman will be in a great hurry."

Then he rang off and returned to me.

"All this is, to me, extremely puzzling," I said.

"No doubt," he answered, with a laugh. "But it will all be explained later on."

"If I consent to assist you, surely you, on your part, will reveal to me in confidence the identity of the unfortunate young man who lost his life in Argyll Road, and of the man who expired so suddenly in the hall of my own house."

"At present, my dear doctor, I am not permitted. To tell you the truth would be to reveal to you one of the strangest stories ever listened to by human ears—a true story which, if related to you now, you would regard as utterly incredible. There are," he added, "still facts which, even to me, are shrouded in mystery, so cleverly was the conspiracy formed and so carefully was it carried out."

"But why is Princess Xenia—for I suppose that is her true title—why is she closeted with the fellow Chiquard and his accomplice?"

"Of necessity. She must show no sign of unfriendliness—at least, not at present," replied the Colonel. "I may as well tell you," he added, "that upon me devolves a very difficult and delicate task, for, as head of the *sûreté* of His Majesty the Emperor, I am charged with the personal safety of Her Imperial Highness."

"To which Emperor do you refer?" I inquired, in great surprise.

"To His Majesty the Emperor Francis Joseph, my Imperial Master."

At that instant a short, ferret-eyed little man entered quickly, unannounced, and bowing, called him away to the other end of the room, where he whispered something in an undertone—something which caused Mordacq great surprise.

For a second he hesitated. Then, of a sudden, a suggestion appeared to flash across his mind, for, turning to me, he said quickly—

"You wish to meet the Princess, doctor, but it must not be here. Why not go with Prince Ludwig over to Mestre and there await her? Chiquard, or his friends, will certainly recognise you if you remain here, and, if so, will follow you. Leave me to get your bags from the Danieli, and accompany Prince Ludwig. Wait at the little café in Mestre—the Stella d'Italia I believe it is called—until Her Highness joins you."

And he rang the bell hastily.

"Has His Imperial Highness left?" he asked the servant in Italian. "Just run down quickly and stop him. Tell him that the doctor wishes to accompany him. He will know."

Then, turning to me without giving me opportunity to protest, he said—

"Follow the man. The launch has not yet left. Remain patient when you get on the other side. If you are not met before midnight I shall telephone to you at the café. I shall ask for Mr. Vernon. Au revoir."

I followed the liveried servant down to the great hall, and out to a side door which opened upon a canal so narrow that one might have touched both walls by extending one's arms.

A smart, electric launch lay beneath the light, with two gondoliers awaiting.

The servant went to seek the Prince and deliver the message, while I stood upon the steps buttoning my travelling coat.

In a few moments His Highness appeared, exclaiming in English—

"Why, doctor, this is a pleasant surprise! I thought Mordacq wanted to keep you here? So we are fellow-fugitives, eh? Let's be off—as he regards our presence as so very dangerous. These men don't speak English, so we can talk quite freely."

He gave the order to push off, and next moment we began to thread through several dark, narrow canals behind the palace, in order, it seemed, to avoid being watched. Presently, however, we entered the Grand Canal and, shooting beneath the Rialto, sped on swiftly past long lines of dark and gloomy palaces until we at length reached the wide lagoon.

"Well, doctor," exclaimed the Prince as, seated by my side, he offered me a cigarette from his gold case. "These are strange adventures, aren't they? My poor sister Xenie has fallen into a trap, and we must extricate her somehow, without courting publicity. There has been enough scandal upon our Imperial House already, as I think you know. Fortunately, she has a devoted friend in yourself."

"I am ready, Prince, to render any assistance in my power," I assured him. "Only, to tell the truth, I am much mystified and puzzled."

"So are we all, my dear sir, almost as much as you are," he declared, as we glided by an ancient water-shrine built upon piles, where a red lamp burns night and day before the old blue-and-white

Madonna, and where the rough hands of fishermen place weekly bunches of freshly plucked flowers.

"Whose palace is that we have just left?" I urged, with curiosity.

"It belongs to my uncle, the Archduke Albert. He is scarcely ever there. He lives mostly in Madrid," explained my companion.

From him also I tried to ascertain the identity of the young man who had lost his life in Argyll Road, but either he was really ignorant, or he would not tell me.

"Upon us all is imposed a pledge of secrecy, doctor," he declared. "For that reason you are told nothing. I cannot break my pledge; I can only regret extremely, for you of all men should be taken into our confidence," he declared, in a low, earnest voice.

Ere long we were skirting the low, grass-covered fortifications, and presently, ascending a long narrow canal to its termination, we both stepped out upon the mainland at the mean and dirty little village of Mestre.

Opposite to where we landed was a large garage, and, entering, we found a long, grey sixty horse-power open car in readiness with plenty of spare covers, and a smart young driver in heavy overcoat standing beside it.

The manager of the garage bowed low when he saw us, and asked if we had given the order by telephone.

"Yes," replied the Prince; "I hope this is a decent car. I'll drive myself. Perhaps I shall be away a week, perhaps a fortnight." And taking some bank-notes from his pocket-book he handed them to the man, and took a receipt.

"Well," he exclaimed presently in English, when he had buttoned up the heavy motor-coat he had brought with him, pulled on his big driving-gloves, and mounted at the wheel, "au revoir, doctor, we shall meet anon! I shall get to Milan in the morning—and then—well, Heaven knows where I shall go," he laughed.

And, gripping my hand warmly, he sped away into the darkness on the Padua Road, his red tail-lamp quickly disappearing from view.

I glanced at my watch and found it to be a quarter to ten. The village was silent and ill-lit on that cold wintry night—the night before the Festà of Natale. A low little country *trattoria* with dirty red blinds was pointed out to me as the Stella d'Italia, and I entered to find it half-full of lounging *contadini*, smoking their rank cigars and ranker pipes, and chattering in the dialect of the Veneto.

Every eye was turned upon me as a stranger, but, seating myself, I called for coffee in a glass, and, lighting a cigarette, took up an old newspaper in pretence of reading, and there possessed myself in patience.

Surely that evening had been fraught with several surprises!

Instinctively I had known that Xenia was a lady, but I had never dreamed for an instant that she was actually an Imperial Highness, or that the merry, engaging Captain Janesco was really Prince Ludwig of Austria, whose name I had so often seen mentioned in the papers as one of the most popular royalties of Europe.

The revelation was, alas! not unmixed with disappointment. In my heart there had, I was compelled to admit, arisen feelings towards Xenia far stronger than mere friendship. Yet what hope of reciprocation could I entertain now that the truth had been explained—that she was Princess of an Imperial House—and I a mere obscure surgeon without even a practice!

Close to me a group of hard-working peasants with merry brown faces were discussing politics. They were Socialists, as are so many of the lower classes in Italy, and I was listening amusedly to their denunciation when a little lad with a red scarf around his throat entered. Looking round he espied me, and approaching said in Italian—

"Will the signore go outside? A lady is awaiting him."

I sprang to my feet, and, following him out a short distance into the darkness, found myself a few moments later confronted by a dark figure in heavy furs, whose soft voice of welcome caused my heart to give a great bound.

Xenia stood before me!

CHAPTER XVIII

XENIA MAKES CONFESSION

"At last, Princess!" I cried, taking the small gloved hand she extended.

"H-sh-sh," she exclaimed anxiously. "We must get away from here as quickly as possible, without being observed. We shall be followed, without a doubt. Do you mind walking along the road? I ordered the car out of the garage by telephone, and it is awaiting me—two kilometres out on the road."

"I am entirely at your service, Princess," I replied, and turning, we walked together out into the darkness where the white road showed straight before us.

"I have learnt much this evening," I said, after we had gone along in silence for some distance; "much that has surprised me. I have learnt your real station, Princess."

"Have you?" she asked, with a light laugh, in that sweet musicial voice I so well remembered. "Did Monica tell you—or was it the ever-alert Mordacq?"

"The latter."

"Ah! And are you so very annoyed with me for concealing my title from you—eh?" she asked. "Surely it was no great offence to go incognita—especially in these curious circumstances!"

"Of course not," I stammered, "only—well I—I had no idea that you were a Princess."

"And did you find a Princess different from any other woman?" she asked. "The public are, I believe, fond of investing us poor mortals with unusual attributes, and yet we, who are born of the blood-royal, are really only ordinary persons like themselves."

She was inexpressibly charming, dainty, and unassuming. Well did I recollect how she had sat in my room on that foggy night chattering with such an air of unconventionality—she, a Princess of the Imperial House of Hapsbourg-Lorraine.

It was on the tip of my tongue to express regret that I had learnt the truth. But I managed to suppress my feelings and laugh at her remark.

"I know of the dastardly trick played upon you by Chiquard in London. Mordacq told me. His agents in London were watching, it seems. While you were in the hands of your enemies you possessed secret friends in the vicinity, for Mordacq is ubiquitous. Nothing escapes him, for, as head of our secret police, he has trusty agents everywhere. The Emperor places implicit confidence in him. Indeed, *entre nous*, I may tell you, Dr. Vesey, that he is the power behind the throne of Austria-Hungary."

"And your protector—eh?"

"He is protecting me as far as he is able," she said in a low voice, as we walked together, she pulling her fur boa closer round her neck, for the wind across those plains blew bitterly cold from the Adriatic. "I read in the papers all the discoveries regarding that horrible affair and the evidence you gave. I thank you for being so loyal to me, and not mentioning my visit to you."

"Had I not promised secrecy, Princess?" I asked.

"Yes, but—well, there was surely every incentive to you to make a statement to the police when you found a stranger lying dead in your own house?"

"Who was he?" I demanded quickly. "Do tell me."

"Not at present," was her quiet reply. "Sufficient for you to know that he was my enemy, and that he followed me to your house with evil intent."

"Evil intent?" I echoed. "What was his object?"

"He intended to kill me—to close my lips," she answered, in a hard, strained voice.

"And the excitement proved too much for him—eh?"

"Yes—according to the evidence you gave before the coroner," she exclaimed, in a strange tone.

"What do you mean?" I inquired, in quick surprise. "Didn't he die of natural causes?"

"How can I tell, doctor?"

"But I see that you do not accept my evidence,"

I said, peering at her in the darkness. I had only caught a single glimpse of her face since we had met.

"I have not said that I doubt it, surely!" she protested. "He died—and that is sufficient. But look—yonder. Is that the tail-lamp of the car?"

And, looking, I saw a tiny speck of red in the dark, starless night.

"You, alas! had a narrow escape when you fell into Chiquard's hands, Dr. Vesey," she went on. "I can only regret it, yet I was far away and could neither warn you nor could I prevent it."

"I wonder they did not kill me outright," I declared.

"They feared what action I might take. They have every motive in killing you, because you know too much. Yet they hold me in fear, because——" and she broke off short.

"Because what?"

She watched for a few seconds, then replied—

"Well—because they are not certain that I shall not throw my reputation to the winds, face public scandal, and order Mordacq to arrest them."

"I do not wish to pry into your private affairs, Princess," I said, reflecting upon her strange words, "yet I must admit that I am filled with curiosity concerning the identity of the poor victim who lost his life in Argyll Road."

She drew a deep breath and shuddered, then, reluctantly it seemed, replied—

"Ah, please do not refer to that horrible affair; it—it is too painful to me. The horror of it all is ever before my eyes. Ah! You do not know. I shall never rid myself of it—never, I fear—never."

"Not until the assassin has met his well-deserved deserts," I said. "Not until Chiquard and Gallini are——"

"No, do not mention those men," she cried, in quick protest, as though their very names were distasteful to her. "Let me act for the future, and try and forget the terrible past—try to atone for the evil I have done to——"

"But surely you, Princess, have committed no evil!" I cried. "You have, perhaps, been the victim of others, in which case no guilt can possibly rest upon yourself."

"Ah, Dr. Vesey, you are far too generous," she cried, her low voice broken by emotion. "You do not know all, or you would judge me differently. You would not extend your friendship towards me, a—a guilty woman!"

There was a strange catch in her voice, and a sob escaped her.

"No, no," I said, in deep sympathy. "I will never believe that you are guilty of any wrong-doing, Princess. You are nervous and unstrung. A great strain has been placed upon you by to-night's events, and at such times one is apt to judge one's self too harshly. Drop the subject for

the present," I urged, "and allow me to serve your interests in whatever manner you deem best."

We had now approached close to the car—a big open one, of high power and, as I noted from its long bonnet, a six-cylinder. And as we came up, the chauffeur, a thin, clean-shaven man whose features I could not well distinguish in the gloom, took off his cap and held it in his hand while my companion gave her orders.

"Ah, Vautel, here you are! We will go first to Bologna," she said in French. "You know the road?"

"*Bien, Altesse,*" was the young Frenchman's response, and as she entered he arranged the heavy bear-skin rugs, beneath which she quickly nestled down, laughing lightly, as though highly amused at the escapade.

I stood upon the ground, whereupon she exclaimed in English—

"You are surely coming with me, doctor. Why are you hesitating? Do you fear committing some terrible breach of the *convenances*?" and she laughed merrily, enjoying the joke.

Yet only a moment before the shadow of a terrible crime had rested upon her. She was, indeed, a strange admixture of gaiety and despair.

The road to Bologna, a broad, straight highway, runs first into the old-world Padua, and thence to the ugly town of Rovigo. And as hour after hour we travelled, our great head-lights shining white

far into the blackness of the night, my dainty little companion nestled closer to me for warmth, pulling her veil across her face and holding her big sable muff to her cheeks.

She wore a neat little motor-bonnet, one of the latest mode, plain and comfortable, while around her neck was a great boa of Russian sable.

I recalled to her our mad drive from London to Dover, whereupon she said, in a hard voice, laying a hand upon my arm—

"No, dear friend, please do not let us recall the past. It is all too painful for me."

"Why are we fleeing?" I asked. "Whom do you fear?"

"I fear my friends—Chiquard and his associates," was her reply in English. "They are unscrupulous. They will hesitate at nothing in order to gain their own cruel ends. Indeed, the safety of our Imperial house is at stake, so widespread and desperate is the plot."

"But how can I serve you?" I asked, as we pulled up before the ancient gate of Padua and were challenged by the guards on the look out for contraband. A word of assurance that we carried nothing dutiable, and we were allowed to thread the dark, crooked old streets of the sleepy medieval town.

"You can serve me in many ways," was her reply. "A week ago I told the Emperor of your kindness to me, and he sent you a message—an expression

of hope that you would act in his interests and in mine."

"I shall only be too happy to serve His Majesty and yourself, Princess, loyally, and to the best of my ability," I answered. "Yet, with Colonel Mordacq assisting you, I cannot see of what avail my good efforts can be—especially when I am in actual ignorance of what really occurred in London, or of the identity of——" and I broke off, stammering an apology for again referring to the affair in Argyll Road.

"Let us get to Bologna," she said. "In the morning we shall have had time to reflect and decide upon our future course. At present it is sufficient to know that you have escaped from Venice without Chiquard suspecting your presence there. He still, no doubt, believes you to be safely beneath lock and key, certified by a stipendiary magistrate as insane."

Then for hours we kept on in silence through the long, cold, starless night. Snow was threatening, and on the plains there was a pitch darkness, only penetrated by our huge acetylene head-lamps.

At last we came to a great dark river a quarter of a mile wide, and, skirting it for four or five miles along a high embankment, we suddenly pulled up and were challenged by a sleepy man in a huge cape, the hood of which was pulled over his head.

Then, beyond, I saw a bridge of boats over the wide river Po, one of Europe's great rivers, and

across it we went with care, slowly and unevenly, as the boats rose and fell with the tide, until we reached shore again at a dark miserable village called Santa Maddalena. Then we sped along the wide, straight road, which opened out again like a long, white ribbon, to silent old Ferrara with its great moated castle so full of historic memories, and out again towards the big, busy city of colonnades and leaning towers, Bologna.

And as the car tore on through the small hours of the morning, and the cold of the wide open plains of Emilia became more biting and intense, I drew her furs about her tenderly, and, seeing that she was worn out and dozing, I remained silent, watchful and full of wonder and apprehension.

Surely mine was a strange journey. Surely the whole affair was a most remarkable problem which, up to the present, admitted of no solution.

Yet my heart sank within me, for was not my dainty little friend, who had so suddenly and unexpectedly entered into my life, a person who could never be more to me than a mere acquaintance—if even that—one whose very birth debarred her from becoming on friendly terms with a mere obscure commoner like myself.

In her sleep her dainty head had fallen upon my shoulder, and, quite unconsciously, she had turned towards me in order to be more comfortable.

I reviewed the situation, laughing bitterly within myself.

And as we tore along in the first grey of the winter dawn—the day of the great festà—I sat gazing in wonder upon the calm, sleeping face of the sweet, refined girl whom I had so strangely grown to love, and in whose company I was being swiftly carried to an unknown bourne.

Why had she uttered that strange, self-condemnation?

What was her guilty secret?

Ah! If I could but have known the amazing truth at that moment, would I have acted as I did?

CHAPTER XIX

HIS EXCELLENCY THE AMBASSADOR

A LONG shrill blast upon the siren as we entered the handsome city gate of Bologna and pulled up for examination by the prying *dazio* guards, caused her to awake with a start and a word of murmured apology.

"I must have been asleep quite a long time!" she remarked, pulling herself together and settling her bonnet. Then, bending to the chauffeur, she ordered him to drive to the Hotel Tre Re.

"We won't go to the Brun," she said to me. "We might be recognised there."

And after traversing a long, colonnaded street, we reached the ancient Piazza with its grim old palace, and, turning to the left up a narrow side street, very busy by day, but at that early hour nearly deserted, pulled up before a small, unpretentious hotel with restaurant beneath.

Here she decided to rest until midday, so she ascended to a room while I, having breakfasted alone, strolled about the town, took a glance at the Leaning Towers and looked into the old cathedral where

the brass meridian-line crosses the time-worn pavement.

At midday the car was at the door again, and very soon the Princess came forth, fresh and bright, Vautel, standing cap in hand, and the hotel-proprietor bowing us away. He had, of course, no idea who the lady was, for she had given a German name and spoken in German to the maid and waiter.

As soon as we had moved out into the Piazza, the Princess Xenia ordered the driver to go along that straight wide highway—the broadest, straightest, and perhaps, dustiest in Europe—which took us northward through quaint old Castelfranco, and across those flat, bare vine-lands to Modena Reggio and on to Parma where, on arrival, the short December day had closed in and darkness had already fallen.

"Where are we going?" I ventured to inquire, as we buzzed on and on, raising behind us a perfect wall of white dust.

"To a place where one's enemies will not find us," was her quiet response, and then she continued chatting merrily, trying, it seemed, to forget that any peril threatened.

"Where is Prince Ludwig, I wonder?" I said.

"Oh, Ludwig will look after himself all right. He's probably on the other side of Europe ere this," she laughed.

"But I can't see why you, in your high station, should fear these assassins?"

"Of course you cannot," she replied, with a strange

look. "You are, as yet, ignorant of the strange circumstances—ignorant of my own follies, or how heavily the punishment I deserve has fallen upon me."

"Have Chiquard and Gallini returned to London?" I inquired.

"No. They will not do so; they fear to return."

"Why did you meet them yesterday when they are your enemies? Was it not courting disaster?" I asked.

"No," she replied. "It was to—well, to conciliate them—to endeavour to secure my own safety."

"And were you successful?"

"Successful?" she echoed. "Do you think that a man of Chiquard's stamp could be moved by a woman's tears? Ah, Dr. Vesey, you do not know him."

"I know sufficient of him to feel a strong inducement to write to Millman, of the London police, and explain what I have discovered."

"And by so doing you would ruin me!" she cried hoarsely. "No, no! You must never do that; never mention a word of the affair to a living soul. You understand?"

"As you wish, Princess," I said, with reluctance, and then we lapsed into silence again.

My mind was ever full of those inexplicable events in Argyll Road. And at the same time the sweet, innocent beauty of the woman at my side had entirely possessed my senses.

Filled with that great, all-consuming passion I longed to seize her soft hand, look into the depths of those wondrous eyes, and lay bare my soul to her. But I dared not. The gulf that lay between us was one that never could be bridged—alas! never.

That grey, bitterly cold afternoon on the never-ending Via Emilia—that road which runs straight as an arrow for a couple of hundred miles or more—will never fade from my memory.

The *contadini*, in their soft felt hats set askew and wrapped in their huge cloaks with collars of rabbit-skin, cast black looks at us as we tore on, leaving the thick trail of dust behind us, and as village after village, town after town we passed, we ceased to regard them until we at last swept into Parma, that ugly, industrial city that is so disappointing.

Here, at a small hotel, we halted for hot coffee, and then, taking with us some biscuits, we continued our way still northward, on and on through the falling night. We passed through Borgo San Domingo and the road which leads to that place of modern "cures," Salsomaggiore, continuing on to Piacenza where, after crossing the old Piazza, where the festà was being celebrated notwithstanding the cold, we turned off suddenly to the left and were soon upon a narrow tortuous road of dark mountains and roaring torrents, that inaccessible district of the Apennines which lies

between the plains of Lombardy and the Mediterranean.

"This is a desolate country," I remarked to my companion as, with speed slackened, we were ascending a winding road around the base of a high bare mountain.

"Yes. Here there are a hundred kilometres or more of road without a house. It is almost uninhabited from here right across to Genoa."

"And we are going to Genoa, I suppose?"

"No," she laughed, "not so far." But she would vouchsafe no further information.

Through dark, wild gorges and by roaring torrents we went on, our glaring head-lights showing deep and terrible precipices as we wound slowly up and down the tortuous road, until, high up before us, I saw lights from many windows. Gradually we approached it by a hundred windings until at length we swung into the great courtyard of an ancient castle—one of those mountain strongholds of medieval days—and a liveried servant came forward inquiringly.

The instant the Princess addressed him in Italian he recognised her.

"Yes, Altezza, His Excellency is at home," he replied. "I will inform him," and opening the door of the car he assisted her to descend, taking her small bag and bowing as we entered the big stone hall together.

Another servant was dispatched to the private

apartments of the owner of the splendid old castle, while for a few moments we stood to thaw ourselves at the great log-fire blazing upon the hearth.

The walls were lined by stands of ancient armour of those retainers who long ago had fought against the Genoese and Pisans, and defended the coast against the cursed Saracen. There were many silken banners hanging above, most of them faded, tattered, and crumbling, mute relics of fierce battles of days bygone.

I looked at her; she was pale and fagged out by the long run.

When we had warmed ourselves—for it was now nearly midnight—we followed a white-haired servant, who bowed before us, up the great echoing hall and, ascending the great stone staircase, upon the walls of which were many handsome coats of arms, we were led along a narrow-carpeted corridor, one of those queer low passages which abound in that fourteenth-century stronghold.

There, however, was no air of gloom about it, for everywhere it was brightly lit by electricity and heated by hot-water pipes.

Suddenly the old servant, bent by years, tapped lightly upon a great oak door and, entering, announced—

"Her Imperial Highness, the Princess Xenia."

My companion went in quickly to a tall, white-headed, aristocratic old gentleman in evening-dress, who had risen from his arm-chair with a hearty

welcome, and taking her hand he bowed, and with exquisite courtesy raised it to his lips.

Then, turning, my dainty little companion introduced me as "a great and intimate friend."

"This," she explained in French, "is Baron d'Eschenburg, our Ambassador to the Quirinal."

And we bowed low to each other.

"A visit from your Imperial Highness is quite an unexpected pleasure," exclaimed the old diplomat. "My wife has retired to bed, but I will tell her maid of your arrival. Have you really motored all the way from Venice in this weather? We only left the Embassy in Rome a week ago, and came here to spend the festâ quietly. I love this old place —as you know," he added, with a laugh.

"You have restored it delightfully since you purchased it," declared the Princess. "I recollect when I was here a year ago with the Baroness the work of restoration was not quite finished."

The Ambassador had touched the bell, and the white-headed major-domo appeared.

"Tell Mariette to inform Her Excellency that Her Imperial Highness has arrived unexpectedly and is staying with us," he said in English.

"Very good, Excellency."

"And you, doctor, must want some food," laughed the Baron, and he added to the servant, "the doctor will have something to eat."

The man bowed and withdrew, followed by the Princess, who explained that she knew her way

about the castle and would go and find the housekeeper.

"Her Highness is always so unconventional," laughed the Ambassador to me when the door was closed. Then, at his invitation, I threw off my heavy coat and sat down before the big wood fire with a cigar.

The polished old gentleman made no inquiry as to whom I might be, or why I had accompanied the Princess. He leaned back in his chair easily and chatted in the full enjoyment of his cigar.

The room was not large, and fitted as a library. But by the two small windows I could see the thickness of the ponderous walls. Thick Turkey rugs covered the stone floor, while the blackness of the oak-beams across the ceiling spoke of the great age of that renovated chamber.

I made a remark to him upon the charm of such an ancient residence, whereupon he said with a laugh—

"Yes. This old Castello di Vallecrosia was built by Count Montaldi in the eleventh century, and for six hundred years was the stronghold of the powerful Counts of Vallecrosia, who were feared by the Genoese and Venetians alike. The Vallecrosia were always independent, and were the chief supporters of the conspiracy of Fiesco in 1547, which attempted to make the supreme power in Genoa dependent on unbridled personal ambition. Beseiged a dozen times by the Doria and the

Fregosi, the old place has never once been taken in its long warlike history; but after the wane of Genoa's power and the establishment of the Ligurian Republic by Napoleon it fell into decay, until I purchased and restored it externally as it was in the days of the Vallecrosia, and internally with some few modern comforts. If you care for ancient castles," he added, "you will perhaps to-morrow, when you look around, find something that may interest you."

A servant ushered me soon afterwards into a big square room with polished floor and hung with fine old portraits, used apparently as a dining-room. On the table spread for me, wax candles burned in great silver candelabra, and behind my chair stood a statuesque flunkey awaiting my bidding.

I saw no more of the Princess that night, but after another cigar with the Baron, was shown a small but comfortable room, reached by a short flight of stone stairs worn deeply by the tread of generations of armed men.

And there I slept heavily till dawn, when, rising, I gazed forth upon a magnificent panorama of mountain and valley; for the great old castle commanded views of the whole country for many miles.

I had breakfasted, and was wandering about the strange old place with its ponderous castellated walls and turrets, its queer nooks and corners, its long gallery of old armour, its splendid tapestries,

and its private chapel, when a neat maid approached me, saying in French—

"Her Imperial Highness wishes me to tell m'sieur that she will see him at noon."

And so I put on my coat and strolled around the outer walls and ramparts in the winter sunshine, patiently awaiting her coming.

CHAPTER XX

BETRAYAL!

I WAS standing musing in an old-world garden where once had been the fosse, and where now tall old cypresses grew, and water plashed into a time-worn marble basin—a secluded garden where the statuary was grey, weather-worn, and lichen-covered, and the old sundial was still set upon its stone column that had been so sadly chipped by the bullets of latter-day besiegers.

All was chill and bare, yet the yellow sunlight fell through the high funereal-looking cypresses, and above the Italian sky was clear and cloudless.

A footstep upon the gravel caused me to turn quickly, when of a sudden I found myself once again face to face with the sweet, unassuming girl whom I had so strangely grown to love.

"I hope you have rested, Princess," I said as I bent gallantly over her gloved hand. "You must have been terribly fatigued last night."

"A little," she laughed lightly. "I feel so much better—for we are, at least, both safe here. Our enemies will never discover our hiding-place."

"Or that of Prince Ludwig, I hope," I added.

She looked inexpressibly charming in a neat little fur toque which matched her handsome sable coat, and a narrow boa of ermine twisted round her throat. Those furs alone must have been worth an enormous sum, I reflected. She must have left some clothes behind on her last visit, for she seemed an erratic little person. Her tweed skirt was very short, displaying a neat silk-stockinged ankle and a tiny brown leather shoe. Her handsome face relaxed into a sweet, winning smile as her mischievous eyes met mine. I looked straight into her face very seriously for a moment, but she lowered her gaze, as though, somehow, she feared that I might read her innermost thoughts.

Together we stood for a few moments in silence. I held my breath.

I wanted to speak, but how could I? What could I say? Her amazing beauty, her personal charm, her unconventionality, and her open frankness of manner held me captive before her. I was neither very young nor was I at all impressionable. Nay, I had long ago laughed love to scorn, and declared that I intended to enjoy my bachelor freedom always. Yet I was now compelled to confess within myself that my dainty little divinity had possessed me body and soul.

"Princess, I—I want to speak to you in confidence," I managed to stammer at last. "I—I want to be quite open and straightforward."

"Are you not always that, Dr. Vesey?" she asked, with considerable surprise, her violet eyes opening a little wider at my unexpected speech.

"I have tried to be," I said, standing before her and raising my eyes seriously to hers. "But I fear that I must fail."

"In what?"

"In my promise to you to be your friend."

"Fail me—why?" she asked, in genuine dismay. "What have I done that you should withdraw?"

Her cheeks had gone paler, and her red lips were slightly parted in her sudden astonishment.

"You have done nothing," I answered. "It is myself who am to blame. I humbly ask your pardon, Princess."

"Really, I don't understand you. Why should you ask my pardon?" she inquired in a low, earnest voice. "It is I who should seek yours for all the uneasiness and discomfort I have brought upon you."

For a moment I was again silent. Her eyes were upon mine, and she was regarding me with that steady, unwavering gaze which spoke so mutely of deep earnestness of purpose.

"It would have been far better, Princess, had we never met!" I blurted forth. "Nothing but unhappiness can possibly accrue from this friendship. Had I but known your real station I would never have sought you again."

Involuntarily she laid her little hand upon my

coat sleeve. I felt it tremble slightly, and a pained expression was upon her countenance as she said—

"No, Dr. Vesey, please do not say that. Recall those words, for you do not mean them. You know very well that you don't."

"I do," I declared. "I must leave you to-day, and we must never meet again."

"Why?" she asked, in a soft voice, her hand still upon my arm. "Why should you leave me? Am I such a very dreadful person then?"

"You know quite well, Princess," I said in a voice of reproof. "You are a woman, and your instinct has already told you the truth—the bitterness that has gripped my heart."

Her cheeks went pale and she held her breath, her splendid eyes still fixed upon mine.

"Dr. Vesey!" she gasped, realising for the first time the truth and reason of my words. "Dr. Vesey, you—you——"

But she controlled herself, and stood for several seconds, her gaze averted to the ground in confusion.

I uttered no word. I only bowed an affirmative.

In a flash the truth had dawned upon her at last, and she stood breathless, staggered and slightly flushed.

Then, with a sudden effort, she braced herself up and spoke.

"I have been blind," she declared in a hard, bitter tone. "Blind until now — blind, perhaps,

because of my rank—blind because so often have I been flattered and courted that I have grown to disregard it. Yes, Dr. Vesey, I am entirely to blame — not you. What can I say to you— more than to condemn myself and express my deepest regret."

"Then let us part, Princess," I urged. "Let us part to-day. I know that I can be of no real service to you further. What I have learnt concerning the tragic affair shall always remain with me an inviolable secret, just as I shall cherish your memory always as that of a very dear friend. Our walks in life lie far apart, so let me leave you and stifle down those thoughts which have filled my mind ever since that eventful evening in London."

For some moments she did not speak.

"Dr. Vesey," she said at last, in a low, hoarse voice, while I saw that her eyes were bright with unshed tears, "you are cruel to me. You promised me your friendship, and now when I most require it you ask me to release you of your promise."

"For a reason—the reason which you have now learnt," was my earnest response.

"You are hardly logical," she protested. "Would you, merely because you fear to bring some little unhappiness upon yourself, abandon me when I am trusting to you my honour, my future—nay, my very life?"

"But—I—I——"

"You have spoken for yourself, Dr. Vesey," she interrupted quietly. "You deem that further friendship with me is injudicious. Why? *Answer me plainly.*"

What could I reply? I stood there before her, mute and crushed by her reproof. Behind us rose those black, grim, giant, windowless walls of the ponderous stronghold, before us the blue Apennines tipped with snow.

I longed to seize that small hand and raise it fervently to my lips. I longed to pour forth the truth of my all-consuming love for her. Yet with one reproachful glance of those wonderful eyes of hers she had reduced me to speechlessness. I had tried to break the fetters which I felt were being forged upon me, but, alas! I had ignominiously failed.

"As we are friends, Dr. Vesey, will you pardon me if I speak quite openly?" she asked in that clear, musical voice which had so charmed me on that foggy night in Argyll Road.

I bowed in assent.

"Well, I admit that the situation is extremely difficult, but not exactly impossible," she said frankly. "For certain reasons which we both now understand, you are desirous of withdrawing from your promise to me, leaving me and returning to London. Well, if you did so, the result, I tell you plainly, would be, for me, disastrous. My enemies would triumph, I—well, I may as well tell

you the truth," she added hoarsely—"I—I should seek death by my own hand!"

"Suicide!" I gasped, staring at her. "What do you mean, Princess? Are you mad?"

"I mean simply that I could never live to face the terrible scandal—that is all," she replied quite quietly. "My life is at stake—indeed, it is in your hands."

"But how can I assist you?" I demanded. "Tell me all. Explain to me."

"Wait and see," was her quick response. Her breath came and went in quick, short gasps, and she had, I noticed, placed her hand upon her breast, as though to quiet the tumult in her heart.

"For your own sake, Princess, and for mine, it is imperative that I should leave you," I declared, after a short and painful silence.

"And you, a man, are not strong enough to control your feelings!" she protested very earnestly, her foreign accent slightly more marked. "Are you not stronger than I am? You should surely be."

"Ah! But you have no affection," I said.

"And pray how can you know?" she demanded quickly, in a hoarse tone, looking again straight into my eyes. "How can you be aware of what thoughts have arisen within me? I tell you that, though a woman may have the misfortune to be born of the blood royal, yet her prejudice, her whims, and her affections differ in no sense whatever from those of other women. Even a princess's

heart, Dr. Vesey, can be filled with affection—a true, honest, and tender love for the man who proves worthy."

What did she intend to convey to me? I held my breath.

I looked at her inquiringly, as she stood with the yellow sunlight in her face, and saw truth and fervour mirrored in those wonderful eyes. She was, no doubt, referring to some one whom she had loved —perhaps that fair-headed young man whom I had seen lying stark dead in that silent house in Kensington.

Her lips quivered slightly, while tears brimmed in her eyes. A flood of emotion overcame her, but only for an instant. The next second she had steadied herself with a great effort and crushed it down.

Yet were those words of hers intended for me; to give me courage and hope, to tell me that she did not despise me, mere obscure commoner though I might be! Was it really possible? The thought staggered me.

I looked upon her face, so fresh, sweet, and open, and saw upon it an expression of intense anxiety. Her eyes were upon the ground as though she were thinking deeply. How contrary are the events of our daily life. What uncontrollable influence had sent her, sweet vision of patrician beauty, so suddenly and mysteriously into my humdrum existence?

"I think it unwise, Princess, for you to press me to remain here," I managed to say at last, in a

low, hard tone. "I fully appreciate your kindness towards me in——"

"My kindness!" she echoed. "Am I not deeply indebted to your kindness? I besought your help in a moment of deadly peril, and, though you did not know me, you gave it freely, without query or hesitation. And now you suddenly—because of a mere whim, it seems—desire to end our friendship!"

"It is not a whim," I declared very seriously. "I feel that to go further will be to court unhappiness and disaster for us both."

"Why should it? Is there no such thing as platonic friendship between woman and man?" she asked.

"In books, yes, but it is rare in circumstances such as those in which we now find ourselves."

"Dr. Vesey," she exclaimed, after a moment's silence, "I understand you perfectly. I can only admire you for your manly resolution and your perfect frankness. But be strong, I beg of you. Crush down any feelings of affection you may entertain towards me, and regard me merely as a friend—a true, devoted friend, if you will—and view the situation from a proper standpoint."

"Ah yes, I know!" I cried in despair.

"Listen," she said, in a low voice; "have I not already told you that upon me rests the shadow of a great and terrible crime? Can you," she added, her words broken by emotion, her handsome face suddenly pale and haggard—"can you entertain

any tender thought, other than perhaps sympathy, for an unhappy woman whose guilt must, alas! ere long be fixed upon her?"

I do not know what mad words I uttered. Perhaps in that moment I was hardly responsible for my actions.

All I know is that ere she was aware of it I had seized her white hand and, bending over it, carried it tenderly to my lips.

A footstep upon the gravel caused her to draw it away sharply, and turn crimson in embarrassment.

Glancing round quickly, I found myself face to face with a man who was my enemy, and upon whose face was a hard, supercilious smile.

And I knew, to my intense chagrin, that I had betrayed myself—that I had compromised her; that we had been discovered and my secret was known!

CHAPTER XXI

CONTAINS FURTHER MYSTERY

MICHEL CHIQUARD stood before us, his large, round, prominent eyes staring out at me with an amused expression of triumph. His was distinctly an evil countenance—a shadow in that cloudless day.

In angry resentment — which was perhaps injudicious—I turned upon him.

"To what, pray, do we owe this intrusion?" I demanded in French.

"My dear sir," he laughed, speaking with his pronounced accent, "it was not intentional, I assure you. I am here in order to speak privately with Her Highness. She left Venice suddenly, and I wish to speak to her."

"What you have to say may surely be said in my presence," I replied in a hard voice. "I have not forgotten how very cleverly you entrapped me in London, and the dastardly charge you made against me!" I recollected what Mordacq had said of him—that he was a man of extraordinary personality.

"London is not Italy," he laughed. "I have no fear of whatever statement you may make against me," he added.

"No, Dr. Vesey," exclaimed the Princess, turning to me anxiously; "please do not quarrel here—His Excellency may overhear."

I bowed, with an assurance that her wishes should be entirely respected. Yet it seemed plain that she feared this round-eyed adventurer, who had followed us so swiftly by train.

"Mordacq thought himself extremely tactful, no doubt," laughed the man, "but I outwitted him." Then he added: "Perhaps your Highness will give me a few moments alone—to conclude the little matter which we discussed in Venice. Our conversation was, unfortunately, abruptly broken off."

"You already know my views," the Princess replied. "It is quite useless to try to persuade or threaten me further."

The man who had posed to me as Janesco shrugged his shoulders carelessly.

"As you wish," was his curt response. "I am here for the purpose of hearing your final proposal," he added, his dark brows contracting.

"Look here!" I cried, advancing determinedly towards the fellow. "You and I have an account to settle, and I shall settle it with the aid of the London police."

"*Très bien, m'sieur*," he laughed, bowing low with mock politeness. "I'm perfectly willing that the

police should make inquiries, for they will then learn something which will greatly interest both themselves and the public. I have no fear. Indeed, I shall welcome investigation—as it would only clear myself of the stigma now upon me."

I stood staring at him, utterly amazed at his open defiance.

"And you shall answer to me for your attempt to confine me in that institution at Isleworth. That, in itself, will condemn you to imprisonment."

"Very well," he laughed, "we shall see. But," he added, "remember it was not I who certified you to be irresponsible, but two doctors and a police magistrate. All was done quite legally and in order."

"And the conspiracy — the plot whereby my identity was denied upon my own threshold?" I asked. "For that you shall answer, if for nothing else!"

"Very well, my dear sir," he said, smiling. "I am quite ready to answer at any moment—if you think it really advisable," he added, glancing meaningly towards my companion, who stood pale, agitated, unable, it seemed, to protest.

The fellow's attitude was that of open defiance, nay, of complete triumph. He held Her Highness completely in his hands. Of that I felt convinced.

Threats were of no avail. High words arose between us, but he merely laughed in my face

and in hers. He knew that she, in her position, could not afford to risk publicity and scandal, while she, on her part, seemed transfixed by fear.

Chiquard's countenance, with its high cheek-bones and prominent eyes, was one which would demand a second glance anywhere. The faces of some men one may pass in a crowd without notice, but his was arresting on account of its strange intensity of expression.

"Listen," I said, after a few seconds' silence; "you intended that I should be held captive and powerless while you completed your ingenious conspiracy—while you effected a final *coup*—eh? But I am free, and I now intend that full inquiry shall be made—I intend that the mystery of that young man's death shall be cleared up satisfactorily."

He broke forth into a harsh, discordant laugh.

"*Bien!* It is only natural that, as the lover of the Princess, you should desire to know the actual truth."

"You intend that as an insult!" I cried in anger, and would have struck him, had not she stood by.

"Take it as you wish," was his cool reply. "I fear nothing—not even Mordacq—but Her Highness has much to fear if you act foolishly, and with indiscretion. Of course, however, you will pursue what course your feelings direct. To me, it is utterly immaterial. The result will, I fear, be the same, Dr. Vesey—your own discomfiture."

I looked from him to her, and I saw that she was trembling visibly, white to the lips. Her countenance

was hard and drawn, and her whole expression that of one who feared lest the truth be spoken.

Recollections of her terrible self-condemnation arose within me. I stood gripped by the iron of uncertainty.

I saw that the fellow whom I had first met on that foggy night in London had travelled hard. He wore a soft felt hat of Italian shape and a long thick travelling-coat. Indeed, as I surveyed him, he smiled across at my companion, saying—

"I have not, as you may imagine, presented my credentials to His Excellency the Ambassador. I guessed that you were here, Highness, so I followed, in order to meet you."

"Somebody betrayed me—a servant at the Palazzo, I suppose?" she asked quickly. "One has few loyal friends nowadays!"

"Your Highness escaped from Venice, but, unfortunately, one so well known as yourself cannot efface your tracks," he laughed.

"Well," she asked boldly, "and why are you here?"

"Simply to receive your answer—the answer which you refused to give at the Danieli."

"I have already given it," she responded harshly.

"And that is your final decision?" he said, his brows contracting.

"It is."

"You have fully weighed the consequences—eh?" he asked very slowly, looking straight into her face.

"Monsieur Chiquard," I intervened, "I will not stand by and allow you to act as inquisitor. Remember you and I first met under suspicious circumstances. Until you give me some satisfactory explanation I refuse to allow you to torture this lady."

"Naturally, as you appear to be her lover!" was his sneering remark.

"I am her friend," I said. "Hence I am your enemy, and——"

"I accept your enmity most cheerfully," he interrupted. "But perhaps if Her Highness dares to speak to you in confidence she will reveal to you the folly of so deliberately quarrelling with me."

"Enough!" cried my unhappy companion. "I know well that you will show me no mercy—now that I have fallen so completely and irrevocably into your hands."

"Explain, Princess," I cried. "All this to me is a perfect enigma. I am your friend, and I will assist you against this man who seeks to torture and destroy you."

"I fear your proferred assistance will not avail Her Highness very much," was his harsh reply. "We have some business to settle — confidential business which does not concern you, my dear sir, in the least."

"The past concerns me," I cried angrily. "The mystery of that affair in Kensington I intend, at

all hazards, to clear up. You know the truth, and, by Heaven! you shall reveal it to me."

He only laughed, while his prominent eyes seemed to grow bigger and rounder. His attitude was one of bitter enmity, which increased with our discussion.

Quite plainly I saw that Her Highness was held by him in terror. He knew the terrible truth.

But what was it? Ay, that was the question.

Here was a man who pitted his wits against those of the famous Mordacq, chief of police, and who, by his remarkable cunning and ingenuity, had secured my confinement as a lunatic, openly defying me, and even laughing at my indignation. For what reason?

Because he had discovered by my unfortunate action that I loved the Princess—the woman over whom he held a power as complete as it was mysterious.

"Now, m'sieur, let us speak plainly—you and I," I said. "What is it that you desire with this lady? She has no wish that you should follow her in this fashion. By a word she can summon the servants and have you ejected from the premises."

"Ah!" he laughed carelessly, "I invite Her Highness to do so. Perhaps my tongue might then be loosened a little. A strange story might then be told—a very strange story."

I caught sight of my companion's countenance. It was ashen pale.

To what, I wondered, did the man refer? His attitude was distinctly antagonistic.

"No matter how strange this story, or how deeply implicated Her Highness may be in certain recent occurrences," I said. "What I desire to know is the true nature of the business you have with her—the business which brings you so hastily across from the Adriatic."

"Let Her Highness herself explain," was his cool reply. "If your friendship is so intimate, Monsieur le Docteur, she will have no secrets from you," he laughed.

"Enough!" I cried, biting my lip viciously. "You are my enemy because I happened to know more of the Kensington affair than is beneficial to you. As enemies I treat you and your accomplice, the bogus Count Gallini."

"Good," he replied, again bowing low. He was a polite rascal. "I leave Her Highness to explain. She will, no doubt, do so more satisfactorily than I ever can. If she reveals to you the truth, I can promise you a very great surprise. *Ma foi!* What a sensation the whole affair will cause when given to the world. The whole of Europe will stand aghast!"

"At what?" I asked.

"At—well, at the truth," replied the man, with a curious smile upon his hard, thin lips.

"Add at the ingenious methods you adopted in order to secure my silence!"

"No, at the marvellous ingenuity and deep cunning of the lady whose champion you have

so suddenly become, doctor," was his slow response. "I forgive you your injudicious and insulting remarks towards myself, because you have been so cleverly misled. Were I in your place, I should have acted just as you have done. All I beg of you, however, is to reserve your judgment until you have learnt the truth concerning that tragic affair in which you have unconsciously become so closely connected."

"But you denounced me as insane—you charged me with an attempt upon your life!"

"For reasons — very good reasons which you will probably learn in due course," was his quick reply.

"And you actually expect me to believe such a lame explanation!" I cried sarcastically.

But the Princess laid her nervous hand quickly upon my arm and urged—

"Please do not argue further, Dr. Vesey! Only bad blood can result. Explanation is equally impossible upon either side."

"May I not speak to your Highness alone?" demanded Chiquard again.

I glanced at her. Our eyes met. I saw in hers a look of unutterable fear.

"No," she answered next moment determinedly. "I have nothing further to add—nothing whatsoever."

"Is that your final decision?" he asked, in a low tone.

Her white lips moved, but so low was her voice that I could not catch her words.

"Then you are prepared to take the consequences of your refusal—eh? You do so with full knowledge of what must inevitably result?"

She nodded slowly in the affirmative, her face hard-set and drawn, her lips pressed together, her eyes staring straight before her.

"Then it will be as well to tell your friend the doctor the truth at once," the fellow laughed. "It must be revealed ere long. You are defiant, therefore I shall consider myself at liberty to explain."

"At the cost of my honour—my life!" she gasped involuntarily.

"Take that!" I cried, and in anger and without hesitation I struck him a heavy blow in the face. "You shall not torture this lady any more. Go! Do your worst!"

She sprang between us in a moment, clinging to my arm, and begging me to desist.

But the fellow reeled beneath my blow, recovered himself quickly, and, with his face crimson where I had struck him, he drew his revolver in an instant. Next second, however, he smiled in triumph, and merely replied—

"When you know the truth, Monsieur le Docteur, you will, I think, regret that you became her friend. But as you wish, we still remain enemies. *Bon jour!*"

And replacing his weapon in his hip-pocket he turned upon his heel, disappearing round the corner of the grim wall of the castle and down a narrow winding footpath which led deep into the valley below.

CHAPTER XXII

MORDACQ GROWS ANXIOUS

When the man Chiquard had gone she stood in silence, trembling visibly.

His final threat seemed to have had an almost electrical effect upon her.

What words I uttered I do not now remember. I only recollect that as we walked slowly back through the old-world garden, she halted against the sundial and, covering her face with her hands, burst into a flood of bitter tears.

Chiquard was her enemy as well as mine. He sought to crush her, and I had resolved to stand by her to the end. I realised by his quiet, patient, yet overbearing demeanour that by some mysterious means he held her completely and utterly in his power.

What the Chef du Sûreté had told me was sufficient to make plain that some great and terrible scandal was threatened; and by those secret instructions from the Emperor it was also manifest that His Majesty himself was endeavouring to act in her interests.

Again I asked her to reveal to me the actual truth. But her only reply between the sobs was—

"I—I cannot! No, I really cannot. You are my friend. Why should I deliberately cause you to hate me?"

I took her hand, and, halting, looked into her eyes, and in a moment of mad passion told her of my unconquerable love.

But she only sighed deeply, and, lowering her gaze to the ground, slowly shook her head.

For some moments we stood together in silence. Both our hearts were too full for mere words. The gulf that lay between us could never be bridged—never!

I drew a long breath of dark despair.

Then, still in silence, she dried her eyes with her little lace handkerchief, and with slow, halting steps re-entered the courtyard of the great old stronghold, where, upon the long stone terrace, the Baron was seated in a chaise-longue smoking a cigar.

Near him, an elderly grey-haired lady in black was standing chatting—the Baroness.

"Ah! Your Highness!" cried the old diplomat, as he caught sight of her. "Colonel Mordacq is in Genoa. He has just rung me up on the telephone to inquire if you are here. He is ubiquitous. Only three days ago I heard from him from Crosswardein. And now he is here in Italy! He is unable to come, and requests your Highness to go to him—to the Hôtel Gênes."

"When?"

"At once," replied His Excellency. "I told him that you could be there in the car in about three hours, and he replied that he would anxiously await you."

"We must go!" exclaimed my companion hastily, turning to me. "But first let us go to the telephone and speak with him."

So we entered the grim old place, and, ascending to the library, she was soon speaking with the shrewd Chef du Sûreté.

She told him of Chiquard's visit, and, as I held the extra receiver to my ear, I heard him urge her to leave Vallecrosia at once.

"I had news that Chiquard passed through Piacenza last night, and therefore suspected that he had obtained knowledge of your whereabouts. I beg of your Highness to come here without delay. Something unforeseen has happened!"

"What is it?" she gasped, turning pale.

"I regret that I can say nothing over the telephone," was his brief response. "Lose no time in arriving here."

So, within twenty minutes, she and I were seated together in the big powerful car, slowly descending the steep road leading through the chestnut woods from the castle to where the picturesque Trebbia winds over the boulders along its deep rocky bed. Thence the road followed the stream over many medieval bridges, through dark, gloomy gorges with

constant twists and turns, through a number of small remote villages southward, towards the sea, until of a sudden we ascended a hill, and before us lay the great white city of Genoa, with its high lighthouse, its busy port, and the azure Mediterranean beyond.

With all speed Vautel drove on and on, until at length we entered the city and, passing up the broad, handsome Via Roma, so full of bustle and life, pulled up before the hotel where the Colonel stood, hat in hand, to receive us.

By his refined face I saw that he was very anxious. Quickly he ushered her into one of the private salons, and, while I waited chatting with the chauffeur, he had a private interview with her.

It lasted nearly half an hour. When he came forth, he invited me into the salon with an expression of apology.

I saw that whatever news he had imparted to her, it had caused her the most intense anxiety. She was standing near the long window, her white hands clasped before her.

I looked at her, but no word escaped her.

The Chief of Police broke the silence.

"Dr. Vesey," he said very seriously, "I think it is only just to tell you that an untoward and unfortunate incident has occurred—one which, I regret to say, considerably increases the peril with which Her Highness is now confronted. Were it not for her high station I could, by a stroke of the

pen, hush up the affair. But, alas! that is quite impossible. The danger has now increased—increased greatly, I fear, by your ill-advised quarrel with Chiquard, and——"

"Then I am to blame!" I cried, dismayed.

"Not at all," he said. "You only acted as Her Highness's friend—acted as any other man would act to protect a defenceless woman from a scoundrel. No. Briefly, our plans have failed. Chiquard and his friends are, as I have already told you, persons of no ordinary stamp. They are utterly unscrupulous; their shrewd eyes being upon us, our every movement is known. They intend mischief, without a doubt."

"But cannot they be arrested and charged with the crime at Kensington?" I demanded.

He shook his head regretfully,

"Why not? You, as Chef du Sûreté, are all-powerful in Austria-Hungary, and could easily arrange the arrest here—in Italy, if you chose."

"And suppose they were innocent of the crime?" he asked, with a strange look.

"Innocent!" I cried. "What do you mean? Is not that fellow with the round eyes the assassin?"

Mordacq merely elevated his shoulders and exhibited his palms with a quick gesture of ignorance.

"What? Are you actually undecided as regards his guilt?"

"There is, unfortunately, no direct evidence against him, my dear doctor."

'Evidence!" I echoed. "Did I not meet him escaping from the house? Did I not meet him face to face?"

"True. You met him in the dark and in a fog," was his reply. "I much fear that your statement of identification could be easily shaken by a clever counsel for the defence."

"Then if Chiquard is not guilty, who killed that poor young fellow?" I demanded.

Colonel Mordacq did not reply.

I glanced across at the Princess. She was standing erect and statuesque, swaying slightly, with one hand upon the window-frame to steady herself. Her gaze was turned toward the noisy street outside, but, by her profile, I saw how white and haggard she had become.

"The actual circumstances of that regrettable tragedy do not, for the moment, concern us as much as the personal safety of Her Highness," replied the red-bearded official in a low, distinct voice.

He presented a smart, elegant, even aristocratic figure as he stood in the centre of the room, dressed in a well-cut black morning coat and grey striped trousers. On the table lay a well-ironed silk hat, and in it a pair of pearl-grey suède gloves. Colonel Mordacq, though a man of iron, fearless, clever, ingenious, with his fingers ever upon the pulse of the great Austrian Empire, was nevertheless an exquisite dandy. He wore an orchid in his lappel and in his left eye a gold-rimmed monocle.

"Is Her Highness's life threatened?" I demanded. "By whom?"

"By her enemies," was his reply. "I shall, as you may imagine, take elaborate precautions for her safety, and——"

A sharp knock at the door caused him to hesitate. Walking across, he opened it to admit a thin-faced, dark-eyed, rather well-dressed young man who, at sight of the Princess and myself, drew back.

"You can speak, Karl. What report?" inquired the Colonel.

"The man Chiquard left the central station a quarter of an hour ago by the train *de luxe* for Paris. He arrived by hired motor-car from Piacenza. Gallini, who came with him, remains at the Hôtel de Londres down by the station. Friedel has gone to Paris."

"Good. Return to the Londres, and do not lose sight of Gallini. He may go to Berlin," replied the Director of Police. "Go with him wherever he goes. I will order Donat to place himself at your disposition. Report in cipher to Vienna."

The police agent bowed, and as the great Mordacq, so sharp and business-like, dismissed him with a wave of his hand, he backed out and, with a military salute, closed the door.

"Dr. Vesey!" exclaimed the Princess, speaking for the first time, "it is, I find, necessary for me to leave Italy—to go at once to Vienna. Dare I ask you to accompany me?"

"I'll go most willingly!" I exclaimed quickly.

"To-day I have received a dispatch from His Majesty the Emperor ordering Her Highness back to Austria," Mordacq explained. "I do not think it quite advisable for her to travel alone, even though she may be under the protection of the Sûreté."

"I will be most delighted to accompany Her Highness," I declared.

"I am sure it is extremely good of you to assist us," he said. "And Her Highness, I know, highly appreciates your kind and constant efforts. It is most unfortunate that we cannot be more outspoken to you, and take you into our confidence. Nevertheless, I promise you that in due course the full seriousness of the present situation shall be revealed to you."

"I am ready to do anything which may be for the benefit or well-being of Her Highness," I assured him. "Yet I think I ought to know whether she is really in any personal danger."

"She is," he answered, again looking me seriously in the face. "Her danger is a very grave and imminent one. The peril is increased by the fact that, as yet, we are unaware of the identity of several of her secret enemies. Of their mode of attack, of the place, or of the time, we have no knowledge. Hence we must never for a single instant relax our vigilance. Indeed, I may as well tell you that upon the result of our inquiries now being made in a hundred different channels, and

upon the safety of Her Highness herself, depends the very future of the Empire."

"I do not quite follow you," I said.

"Not at the moment, perhaps; but in a day or two at most you will be in a position to realise the alarm with which even I, as Director of Police, view the abnormal situation."

"You will go with me, Dr. Vesey?" urged the Princess, in a strange, tremulous voice. "I know I shall be quite safe in your hands," and she raised her great violet eyes to mine.

"Princess," I said very slowly, looking her straight in the face, "I am entirely at your disposal."

"Ah!" she cried wildly, with pale drawn face. "I know I can rely upon your—upon your discretion. True, it is because I am aware of the ghastly truth that I am placed in this awful position, surely more terrible, more horrible, than ever woman before found herself! Ah, Dr. Vesey! you, my dear friend, do not know, you cannot even dream the real, amazing facts, or—or assuredly you would pity me—you would realise how in these ugly circumstances I would gladly welcome death to this ever-present agony of mind. Upon me—accursed that I now am—there, alas! has fallen my punishment—by night or by day—the hideous recollection of that one horrible moment which froze my senses and turned my heart to stone!"

What, I wondered as I looked at her, could be the true solution of that strange problem?

CHAPTER XXIII

CONTAINS ANOTHER MYSTERY

THE winter train *de luxe* Ventimiglia–Vienna, so greatly patronised by Austrians and Russians who go to and fro from the Riviera, halts at Genoa ten minutes before midnight, therefore Her Highness—giving the name of Miss Wilson—ascended to her room to rest.

The busy, noisy city of Genoa was not new to me, but as Mordacq had an appointment I idled along that quaint street of medieval palaces, the Via Balbi, and dined leisurely at the crowded Posta, an essentially Italian place I knew of in the Arcade.

About nine o'clock, when sending a telegram to Phelps to forward my letters to Vienna, I met the dandified man with the reddish beard, whom none would have suspected to be the Austrian chief of police. He was standing beside a little beetle-browed man, who was in the act of writing a telegram, and calmly smoking a cigarette, appeared to be awaiting some one. He stared straight into my face without sign of recognition, by which I

saw that he was keeping observation upon the rather shabby, under-sized little Italian who, all unconscious, was laboriously writing a message upon the pale blue form.

Mordacq gave me a meaning look, therefore, after dispatching my own message, I withdrew from the office, and, retiring some distance, lounged in the shadow to watch.

Presently the Italian came forth and, crossing the piazza, was joined by a well-dressed young woman who emerged from a dark doorway to meet him. Then the pair quickly disappeared down a dark narrow lane, behind the old church of San Lorenzo.

From where I stood I saw that Mordacq had watched, but he had not followed. The tall, thin figure of a man had suddenly emerged from nowhere and was strolling leisurely after them in the darkness.

I did not approach the Director of Police. His quick glance had told me that, at that moment, my presence there was unwelcome, so I allowed him to stroll away, and turning into a café, idled over a copy of the *Caffaro*, affixed to a stock.

The café was full—as they are all full on a winter's night in the vicinity of the Piazza Deferrari—and I suppose I had been immersed in my newspaper for a quarter of an hour when, on raising my head, I became suddenly conscious that, seated opposite me, against the wall, was a well-dressed, dark-haired girl of about twenty or so, accompanied

by a man much older. Her handsome features were of a Hebrew cast, and as she raised her eyes furtively towards me I could not help admiring their lustre. Then I recognised her as the young woman who had called upon Gallini in Venice!

She whispered something to her companion in an undertone, but he did not glance in my direction, being then in the act of lighting his long Cavour cigar.

She leaned her elbow upon the little, marble-topped table and pretended to take no further notice of me, yet, somehow, I instinctively knew that she had evinced a curious interest in me—that, indeed, she was watching me!

Pursuing evasive tactics I made pretence of being quite unconscious of her attention, and felt convinced that though the pair did not look in my direction, they had followed me there.

She looked like a shop-assistant, while her companion I took to be a small shopkeeper. He was about fifty-five, with eyes keen and searching beneath grey, overhanging brows.

At first I was rather amused by the fact that these mysterious watchers were following me, for now that I reflected, I recalled having seen the girl enter the restaurant where I had dined, she then having been alone. Without doubt she had been following me all that evening! Her companion was there perhaps because it was not considered the thing for a girl to enter a café unaccompanied.

I lit another cigarette, placed aside my paper, and leaning my elbows on the table as I smoked, fixed my gaze straight upon the pair. The result was just as I expected. The girl became very uneasy. She flushed slightly, fidgeted, whispered something to her companion, and a few moments later they rose and left.

As she passed by my table I smiled at her intentionally, in order to show her that I had discovered the espionage to which I was being subjected.

In preference to returning to the hotel, for it was then just ten o'clock, I went to another café a little farther down the new Via Venti Settembre, and until a few minutes to eleven remained there, thinking deeply over the mysterious pair.

After all, I might have been mistaken. Perhaps that second meeting had only been accidental. Why should she watch my movements?

At a quarter to eleven I re-entered the hall of the hotel and sent a message up to Her Highness's room that I was ready.

A few moments later—while I stood speaking with Mordacq, who had just come in — a waiter approached me, saying in English—

"Mademoiselle Wilson has left the hotel, sir. She went out shortly after eight o'clock."

"Left!" we both gasped, staring dismayed at each other.

"She's coming back, I suppose," I asked.

"No, sir. Mademoiselle paid her bill," was the man's reply.

"But did she not leave any message?" demanded Mordacq in quick alarm, as he advanced to the bureau and made further inquiry.

"Mademoiselle dined in her room, sir," was the reply of the neat young reception-clerk. "She descended in the lift at about five minutes past eight, paid her account, and went out."

"She left her bag, of course," exclaimed Mordacq. "She will, no doubt, return."

"At half-past seven mademoiselle received a letter delivered by hand, and from what the *femme de chambre* told me, it seemed to cause her the most intense anxiety."

"From whom was the letter?" asked the police official, whose identity was, of course, unknown. "I mean, who delivered it?"

"A young woman dressed in black. She was shown upstairs, and handed it to mademoiselle personally."

A young woman in black! Could she have been the same person who had been watching me!

"Curious," exclaimed Mordacq reflectively, "very curious that mademoiselle should go forth and leave no message for me!"

"Perhaps she will return," I said. "She has left her bag, and there is still time to catch the north express."

"Mademoiselle does not intend to return," the

hotel-clerk assured us. "She asked me to store her dressing-bag until she sent for it. A quarter of an hour after she had left, the same young woman who had brought the note called and handed me a scribbled message, asking for her bag to be delivered to the bearer. Here is the note," and he handed us a scrap of paper, whereon the request was written in pencil in Her Highness's handwriting.

Mordacq stood dumbfounded.

"I wonder what has happened!" he exclaimed, turning anxiously to me. "Some treachery, perhaps."

Then, briefly explaining in confidence who he was, and presenting his card, he asked to be allowed to see the room lately occupied by Mademoiselle Wilson.

We ascended in the lift, and on entering the big room he at once went to the stove, examined the waste-paper basket, and looked around everywhere, in the hope of discovering some fragments of the mysterious letter which had caused her so suddenly and so secretly to alter her plans.

But nothing remained. She had slept upon the sofa, washed her hands, dined, and left—left us without a word.

I confess I felt annoyed. Yet the greatest anxiety now seized me. I saw that Mordacq, too, was full of serious apprehension, for as soon as we were outside the hotel he said—

"We will go to the Hôtel de Londres. Gallini is there. He may know something."

So together we entered a *fiacre* and drove to the

huge white monument to Christopher Columbus, which stands in the centre of the handsome piazza before the station. On alighting, a man crossed quickly to us. It was the thin-faced brigadier of the *sûreté* who had called upon his chief to report at the hotel.

"Well, Karl," asked Mordacq quickly in French, "is he still across yonder?" and he motioned towards the long, white façade of the Hôtel de Londres.

"Yes, monsieur. I understand that he has told them that he leaves to-morrow."

"Have you seen anything of Her Imperial Highness?"

"No, monsieur. I have been here all the evening."

"Do not leave for a moment. You must manage to watch all night. He may give us the slip—being so near the station. Donat should be due from Milan at half-past one in the morning. He telephoned to me half an hour ago saying that he was leaving and would meet you here."

"Very well, monsieur."

"Her Imperial Highness is missing," Mordacq added, "therefore keep constant watch for her arrival here at the station."

"Missing?" echoed the man. "I hope there's no suspicion of foul play!"

"A mysterious message has taken her away without a word," was all his chief replied, "so remain here vigilant. Something very serious may have

happened. I shall visit you at two o'clock—after Donat has arrived."

And we turned away and entered the great echoing railway station.

We were upon the platform when the Vienna train *de luxe*, with its warm, well-appointed restaurant, and half a dozen sleeping-cars — the train patronised by Russian princes and the *escrocs* of Europe alike — drew in. Though two compartments had been reserved upon it for Mademoiselle Wilson and myself, yet, after a brief halt, it slowly moved out again upon its long journey north without the Princess making her appearance.

Mordacq was much puzzled.

I told him of my own curious experience that evening—of the dark-haired Jewess who had watched me so narrowly, and suggested that she might be the same person who had delivered the letter at the Hôtel de Gênes.

My story greatly interested him, and he made me describe her very minutely. To me it seemed as though a sudden suspicion had been aroused within him, for as we walked he suddenly ejaculated—

"Ah!"

The tone in which he uttered that word told me that he suspected something. Indeed, he invited me to walk with him again to the telegraph office, whence he dispatched a long message.

The cause of the sudden disappearance of Her Highness was an entire enigma.

I tried to obtain from my dandified companion the reason of his observation upon that inoffensive-looking man who had written a telegram earlier in the evening, but his only reply was—

"He's a person in which I have some passing interest. In my position as Director of Police I am often compelled to keep watch upon those whom I suspect as enemies. Even though I happen to have control of over one hundred thousand agents of police throughout the Empire, and in various capitals abroad, I am yet sometimes compelled personally to direct an inquiry of such magnitude as the present."

"But the Princess!" I cried in despair. "What can possibly have happened to her?"

"My dear doctor, that is just the question I am asking myself," was his slow response in English. "Let us hope that she has not fallen into some trap cunningly prepared by those unscrupulous blackguards who intend striking a blow that will shatter the Empire to its foundations!"

"What do you mean?" I asked, as we walked on through the dark, silent street. "Cannot you be more explicit, Colonel Mordacq? Is all this secrecy quite fair to me?"

"Explicit?" he cried. "What can we think—what can we now surmise? Her Highness, always erratic and unconventional, has deliberately escaped us. She knows the dire peril by which she is threatened—she is fully aware of the evil intentions

of Chiquard and his friends—and yet she dares to meet them single-handed!"

"You mean that they will kill her!" I gasped, clutching quickly at his arm.

For a few seconds he was silent, then, in a low, intense voice, he replied—

"That, to be frank, is exactly my fear, doctor. If they have opportunity she will most assuredly share the same fate as that poor young man in London."

"But how foolish to have left us in this manner!" I cried.

"Yes," he said. "This movement of hers is the result of some clever ruse, without a doubt—a ruse which her enemies intend shall prove fatal. Genoa is a city full of dangers and pitfalls for the unwary. She is lost to us—lost so completely, perhaps, that we may never again find trace of her! And I—I, Director of Police, have to answer to the Emperor, my master!"

CHAPTER XXIV

AN ASTONISHING STATEMENT

IMAGINE my feelings. What strange things were happening to me—prosaic, matter-of-fact man of the world that I was!

Her Highness had walked out of the hotel, sent for her dressing-bag a quarter of an hour later, and then disappeared as completely as though the earth had swallowed her.

The great Mordacq—one of the most famous and astute police officials of Europe—betrayed the most intense anxiety.

That night neither of us slept a wink. I was with him when, soon after two o'clock, he crossed the handsome piazza before the railway station, and a short, elderly, well-dressed man emerged from the shadow into the light of the big arc-lamps, saluted, and spoke a few hasty words in some language which I did not understand—Hungarian, I suppose it was.

He was the police agent, Donat, who had come from Milan to relieve his colleague of his long, cold vigil. The white façade of the Hôtel de Londres

was now in darkness, yet we knew that within Gallini remained—no doubt eager to escape Mordacq's vigilance.

The Director of Police gave the watcher certain explicit instructions, and then we walked away, back to the centre of the city. Only the uniformed police, with now and then a belated roysterer, were astir beneath the cold glare of electricity as we both bent our steps towards our hotel.

Of the night-porter we learned nothing. There had been no message for either of us.

Myself, I felt both annoyed and dismayed. In her interests I had acted with the best intention, because I loved her so dearly, and yet she had, after begging me to accompany her to Vienna, coolly departed without a single word! Her tactics seemed the same as those she had pursued in London immediately after the tragedy. Her flight had then been under compulsion. Had it been so that night?

What, I wondered, was the nature of that mysterious message? And why had I been so closely watched?

Mordacq feared foul play. I saw it in his pale, refined face. He was unusually silent, and again went to the telegraph office, whence he dispatched three more long messages. Was it possible, I wondered, that Xenia was now held captive as I had been? Or had some worse fate befallen her?

"The men we are fighting are desperate and utterly unscrupulous," Mordacq had said as we

walked along. "They will hesitate at nothing so long as they gain their own dastardly ends. I feared some terrible catastrophe, as I told you when we met, this afternoon. It has, alas! fallen more quickly than I anticipated."

How I passed that long night of fevered anxiety I scarcely know. Mordacq, usually so calm, imperturbable, and easy-going, had now become anxious, alert, and active. He had questioned all the hotel servants in turn, but the result of his investigations had practically been nil.

A trap had undoubtedly been set, and she, in her innocence, had fallen into it.

"They evidently got wind of the fact that I am in Genoa," remarked Mordacq in English as we sat together in one of the small night cafés in the Via Roma, "and they have effected their *coup* before I could complete my plans."

"But Gallini is at the Londres. You can see and question him," I suggested.

Mordacq slowly removed his cigarette from his lips and examined it as he said in a low voice—

"No. Half an hour ago I made inquiry by telephone of the night-porter at the Londres. Gallini is no longer there!"

"Escaped?" I gasped, staring at him.

"Yes. By some means he discovered that an agent of secret police was watching in the piazza, and I can only think that he slipped out by the baggage entrance and across to the station. Neither

Karl nor Donat are yet aware that he has gone. It will be a cruel awakening for them to-morrow," and he smiled.

For a whole, never-ending week I remained there in Genoa eagerly awaiting some word from her. Mordacq departed suddenly one night for Paris in consequence of a telegram, leaving Donat, the inspector of the Vienna secret police, at my disposition.

Short of stature, aged about fifty, with closely cropped grey beard, he proved quite an acceptable companion. Hungarian by nationality, he was a thorough-going cosmopolitan, for, as he explained to me, his duties lay in the various capitals of Europe in turn, and never in Austria. Speaking English, Russian, and Italian with equal fluency, he was ever alert and ever watchful as together day after day we wandered the busy streets of Genoa and searched the cafés in the evening to rediscover that dark-haired Jewess who had kept observation upon me.

But though a week elapsed we found her not. Neither did we discover anything further concerning her.

Donat was constantly exchanging telegrams with Vienna and with his chief, who, after a day in Paris, went on to Brussels, and thence to Cologne. Then, one morning when I met the police inspector in the hall of the hotel, he said—

"I had a message from the director in the night,

sir, asking me to tell you to leave Genoa, and return to London. It is useless to remain here further, he says. I am ordered back to Berlin."

"Then the search has now been abandoned!" I cried in dismay.

"Who knows? Perhaps the chief has discovered something—perhaps he is aware where she is. His telegram was dispatched at eleven o'clock last night from the private telegraph bureau of the Emperor, at the Château of Schönbrunn."

"Then he has had audience with His Majesty!"

"Probably. He usually has private audience every week," was the inspector's reply.

I sent a telegram to Mordacq at the Bureau of Police in Vienna, and in response received five hours later a message in cipher which Donat read for me.

"No use remaining longer," it said; "return home. Have nothing yet to report. Anything you discover report at once by wire, addressed X.R. 428. Vienna."

And so, puzzled and despairing, I bade farewell to Donat upon the railway platform, and two days later alighted at Charing Cross and drove in a taxi home to Argyll Road.

Phelps and his wife were delighted at my return and as that night I sat alone by the fire in my own den my thoughts wandered back to that fateful evening when I had so suddenly received a mysterious visitor.

Since that memorable 10th of December how many strange adventures had befallen me?

I, confirmed bachelor that I had been, was now deep and hopelessly in love, yet, alas! the object of my passionate affection was withheld from me. She had left me without a word.

All along I had known that my affection could only be the grave of hope, that she, a princess of the blood-royal, could never become the wife of a mere unknown commoner like myself. Yet, try how I would, I could not free myself from those meshes which her beauty and sweetness had cast about me. I was hers, wholly and completely—and she knew it.

Why, therefore, had she not told me the truth? Why had she not left me word where she intended going, so that I might have remained at her side now, in these days of her deadly peril.

Had she, alas! already fallen a victim to some deep and desperate conspiracy? Were Mordacq's fears justified?

Was she already dead?

Several days passed, grey, gloomy winter days in London—days terribly dispiriting to one in my frame of mind.

Many a time I went to my dining-room window to gaze across at the smoke-blackened front of that house of tragedy. But it was still closed, and the blinds were down.

One afternoon I sought Inspector Millman at New

Scotland Yard, and there, in the bare room wherein I was received, he revealed to me the one fact which had been elucidated by their inquiries.

"We circulated to the European police the portrait of the man who was found dead in your house, Dr. Vesey," he replied, "and, curiously enough, it was identified from Trieste. The card found in his pocket was his correct one. His name, it appeared, was Enrico Spinola, an Italian subject who had become a naturalised Austrian. He was a wool-merchant living in Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia, and had been mayor of that city until the sudden annexation of the country by Austria, which —as you will recollect—was effected two years ago, and very nearly caused a serious war in the near East. Austria, regardless of the protests of the Powers, tore up the Berlin Treaty and annexed Bosnia and Herzegovina in defiance of Servia and Russia."

"But what could he have been doing in my house?" I inquired.

"Ah, that we are unable to tell. The Trieste police are strangely vague in their replies, but from them I gather that the deceased was a person who had, for some reason, been under their surveillance. They say that, on leaving Austria, he went to live with a companion named Michel Chiquard at an address in Cambridge Street, off Edgware Road. I went there at once, only to find that Chiquard had left for the Continent a fortnight before."

"And then?"

"I made further inquiry in Trieste regarding Chiquard, but learnt very little. There seemed no charge against him, for the Trieste police made no application for his arrest or extradition. Briefly, that is all we have discovered."

"And the identity of the young man who was killed in Argyll Road?"

"That is still unsolved. Spinola could, no doubt, tell us, but he is, unfortunately, dead. It is altogether a remarkable problem. The whole intelligence of the 'Yard' has been directed upon it, but we've learnt next to nothing."

In consequence of the promise I had made to Her Highness, I explained nothing, except vaguely that I had been away for a change for a week or two. I gave no information. I did not even tell him of my experience of Chiquard and the cleverly devised trap into which I had fallen.

"Trieste is in Austria, of course," I remarked quite casually. "Who is the chief of the Austrian secret police?"

"Why, Mordacq—the most successful detective in Europe. If we in London could only adopt some of his methods we should be far more successful in the detection of crime."

"Is he such a very wonderful person, then?"

"Wonderful?" echoed the inspector; "why, my dear doctor, the very name of Mordacq—the great Mordacq—strikes terror into the heart of every

criminal in Austria-Hungary. We admire his methods, and we try to imitate him wherever possible. Under his clever direction the secret-police system, both criminal and political, of the Austrian Empire is to-day the most complete and effective in all Europe. His successes have been almost miraculous. I met him once; he called here in person a year ago, and I assisted him in some inquiries he made regarding two Austrians who were printing forged hundred-kroner bank-notes out at Hendon. He is a very short, stout, elderly, rather shabby-looking man—but his alertness and his ingenuity in keeping observation in a dozen different guises was utterly amazing."

"A short, elderly man!" I cried, staring at him dumbfounded.

"Yes, why? Have you never seen his photograph in the newspapers?"

But for the moment I was too confused to utter further word.

The description was certainly entirely opposed to that of the tall, refined, even elegant Mordacq whom I knew.

Had I again been tricked and fooled?

CHAPTER XXV

THE HOUSE OF MYSTERY

My heart sank within me.

Millman, in further response to my inquiry, left me for a moment, and on his return brought me a snapshot portrait cut from a daily illustrated newspaper.

Beneath it was the name, "Colonel Mordacq—the famous Chef du Sûreté of the Austria-Hungarian Empire."

I stared at it, dumb in amazement.

It was on the tip of my tongue to relate to him my strange experiences in Italy, but I managed to control myself, and leaving him, returned home more than ever puzzled.

As day succeeded day and the month of February was passing, I remained sad, moody, and full of gravest apprehensions regarding my lost love.

A long letter I had written, and a telegram I had sent to the cipher address in Vienna, had elicited no response. Yet, when in Genoa had I not communicated with Mordacq himself and received a reply?

In various quarters I made constant and independent inquiry regarding the world-famous chief of police, and from each source I discovered that he was a grey-haired, under-sized man, quite insignificant in appearance.

One thing, therefore, was quite plain—that the Mordacq I knew was not the real Mordacq!

This led me to a further strange suspicion. Was Xenia really what she had represented herself to be?

So complicated was the whole problem, and so full of mystery in every detail was it that I hardly dared believe what I saw with my own eyes, or heard with my own ears.

I went about London like a man in a dream. I called at the house in Cambridge Street one day, but the landlady informed me that Mr. Chiquard and his valet—the fellow Gallini—had left her long ago—returned to the Continent, she believed.

From her I learned but little further, except that Mr. Chiquard was a very pleasant gentleman and paid her handsomely.

"I wish I had more paying guests like 'e was," added the voracious old person as I took my leave.

Argyll Road, of which I beheld a daily, nay, hourly, view, had altered not one whit. Indeed, it has not altered in the least for the past thirty years—the same quiet, highly respectable thoroughfare, dull and dispiriting, lying back from the vulgar business bustle of the garish High Street, Kensington.

Walk up it any day and you will only see a butcher's cart passing, and the neat brougham standing before a doctor's house. There are few passers-by. The stucco fronts of the genteel, old-fashioned houses are mostly smoke-grimed, the laurels and small trees in the front gardens are stunted and soot-laden, a piano is strummed upon in nearly every house, while the only other sound is the hum of the motor traffic in the High Street.

Upon this scene I stood gazing out of my dining-room window about three o'clock one grey February afternoon. Then, of a sudden, I caught sight of a figure which I instantly recognised—the figure of a well-dressed man in silk hat and black overcoat.

Without a second's hesitation I drew back, and only just in time, for he passed my window, coming up from the direction of the High Street.

I could scarce believe my eyes. It was Michel Chiquard himself.

Drawing back behind the curtains, I watched, and saw him halt suddenly and, turning in to the house of mystery, he ascended the front steps.

Then, for the first time, I noticed that the blinds were up. Somebody was within, for almost instantly his ring was answered, the door was thrown open, and he disappeared within.

I stood staring at the closed door utterly amazed. What fresh plot was now in progress?

The bold fearlessness of the fellow was indeed

apparent when he passed up the quiet street in broad daylight and actually returned to the house wherein the tragedy had occurred.

From behind the curtain I watched for his reappearance, but nearly an hour later I saw Gallini, smartly dressed, approach from Upper Phillimore Gardens—at the opposite end of the road—and after glancing quickly up and down, he also ascended the steps, rang, and was instantly admitted.

Hardly had the door closed when I saw a taxi approaching in the fast-falling dusk, and when it pulled up before the house of mystery a girl alighted and paid the driver.

As she turned, I recognised her as the young Jewess who had watched me on that eventful night in Genoa—the girl who, it seemed, had conveyed that mysterious message which had caused Her Highness to disappear.

I rushed to the telephone and tried to get on to Millman, feeling that some fresh conspiracy was in progress, but to my dismay he was not at the "Yard." I was told that he was somewhere down in Limehouse, making an inquiry.

My first impulse was to inquire for another officer, but fearing lest the affair should be bungled, I decided to watch myself and report to that cipher address in Vienna.

The taxi-driver had leisurely lit a cigarette, and was just moving off when I returned to the window. I was careful not to be seen, for from any of the

windows of that house they could obtain a full view of mine.

No doubt they knew of my return, and therefore would glance across to see if I were watching.

Their bold audacity amazed me. Here they were again taking illegal possession of the premises in broad daylight—occupying a house which had already been under the surveillance of the police.

Indeed, the constable on the beat slowly approached from the High Street and passed the very door, all unconscious that within were a band of desperate criminals about to effect another mysterious *coup*.

I admit that I myself was utterly confused and powerless. What would you have done had you been in my position?

Darkness crept on quickly, the street-lamps were lit one by one, and the watching became more and more difficult. Each casual passer-by I tried to scrutinise, but behind the glass it was difficult. Therefore, dashing upstairs, I got out an old hat I had used for fishing and a disused raincoat, with which I made a hasty attempt to disguise my figure, and slipping out of the house, quickly gained the High Street.

Crossing the road, I halted on the opposite pavement, pretending to examine a jeweller's window, but all the time keeping a keen eye upon the end of the quiet dark road in case any one should emerge from it.

Almost next door was a public-house, and I realised

that any one standing in its side-door—a salon-bar entrance—could watch the end of Argyll Road without himself being seen. Therefore I slipped in, and stood with my eyes glued upon the street corner.

I longed to be able to communicate with Millman—to learn what was at that moment in progress in the house of mystery, but, alone and unaided, I could only wait there and watch.

My sole thought was of Xenia. Where could she be? Were those strange conspirators, playing their wits against an empire, plotting further against her?

Their audacity to meet again at that house in Argyll Road was assuredly amazing.

I suppose I had waited in the doorway for nearly half an hour when, of a sudden, the figure of a short, elderly woman emerged into the zone of lamplight at the corner of the road, and to my surprise I recognised her as Mrs. Orrock, the caretaker of the house in question.

She was coming from the house, and yet the intruders were within!

I watched the spare figure in black bonnet and shawl as she hurriedly crossed the road, evading a motor-bus, and, walking towards the corner of Earl's Court Road, entered a fruiterer's and there made a purchase. Then, carrying a brown paper bag, she went into the grocer's, which is at the same time the local post office, and a few minutes later again emerged and bent her steps towards Argyll Road.

Just as she reached the turning I overtook her beneath the lamp and claimed acquaintance with her. For a moment she halted, peering into my face somewhat puzzled, then she exclaimed—

"Lord, doctor, you did give me a start, sir!"

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Orrock," I replied. "You, of course, remember me on that night when—well, when we made that tragic discovery at Mrs. Kynaston's?"

"Ah, sir, I remember everythink—only too well. My mistress is 'ome, doctor. She came 'ome yesterday."

"At home?" I gasped. "Then she's back from India? I noticed that the blinds were up to-day."

"Yes; she's got visitors this evening. That's why I'm sent out all in a hurry to buy some things. But I'll 'ave to get back at once," she added anxiously.

Visitors? Surely her visitors were not those dastardly conspirators—Chiquard and his friends?

"Does Mrs. Kynaston know of the tragic discovery in the house?" I inquired quietly.

"No, doctor; I 'aven't told 'er as yet," she replied. "The fact is, I 'aven't 'ad the courage to tell 'er. It was my fault, remember, in not looking more closely after the place. I'm to blame, and I've never forgiven myself—an' never shall, neither!"

"The police have not yet been to see her—eh?"

"No, doctor. They'll come one day, no doubt, but for the present my mistress is in complete ignorance of what occurred. On the carpet in the room upstairs she noticed that stain, but I've convinced her that it

is owin' to the fact that Sarah, the 'ousemaid, on the morning she left, upset a pail of dirty water there, and it made the ugly stain."

"The stain of blood," I remarked.

The woman nodded, adding, "I did my best to get it out, but there's a nasty dark patch there still." Then in a few, brief, anxious words she explained the necessity of returning at once, as her mistress had "company," and the staff of servants had not yet been re-established, because Mrs. Kynaston had only arrived in London overland from Marseilles on the previous night.

"I 'ad no idea she was in England before I got 'er telegram from Dover a-tellin' me to meet 'er at the house. But she's always a remarkable woman, she is," she added.

"Who are your mistress's friends?" I asked quickly.

"I don't know, doctor—perfect strangers to me. I've never seen 'em before. There's a young man, an elderly man, and a young woman—foreigners, all of 'em, or at least they're a-jabbering away in French, or somethink. I don't like foreigners."

"Well, now, look here, Mrs. Orrock," I said, bending to her confidentially, "I'm very much interested in those men, and if you'll leave your area door unlocked and take no notice if I happen to come in, I'll give you a five-pound note."

"But I can't do that, sir!"

"A five-pound note will come in very handy to

you," I laughed. "Go on. No blame will rest upon you—I'll guarantee that."

And after some hesitation and somewhat reluctantly, the woman nodded consent and turned away up the dark, deserted road.

I ran up my own front steps, entered my study, and obtained my revolver, which I loaded and placed in my pocket. Then I went forth again to the top of the road, where I crossed and walked back until I came to the area gate of the house of mystery.

Swiftly, and on tiptoe, I entered, descended the steps, and next moment was inside the door, in a dimly lit passage, at the end of which was a flight of stairs leading to the hall above.

Peeping through the kitchen door I saw the woman bending over a saucepan, and whispered her name. She turned, but I placed my finger upon my lips.

"Where is your mistress?" I asked in a low voice.

"Upstairs in the drawin'-room," was her reply. "She's a-talking with 'er friends. Take care, doctor, that she don't 'ear you—won't you?" she added anxiously.

"Leave that to me," I whispered, and I crept softly up the stairs.

CHAPTER XXVI

WHAT I DISCOVERED AT MRS. KYNASTON'S

IN the hall I halted to listen, for the kitchen stairs, covered with linoleum, creaked horribly.

Fortunately the hall and main stairs were carpeted thickly, and after reassuring myself that all was safe I ascended the stairs quickly, until I gained the landing. Well did I remember the scene there on the night of the tragedy.

In fear lest some one should suddenly emerge and discover me, I halted for a moment at the door of the drawing-room, where within I could hear voices, therefore very carefully and noiselessly I turned the handle of the other door.

I held my breath. I knew not whether any one might be within. I had placed my revolver in my jacket-pocket in readiness to defend myself if necessity arose.

That moment of uncertainty and dread was indeed an exciting one.

But as I slowly opened the door I saw, to my delight, that the room—the room wherein the unknown man had been so foully done to death—was in darkness. The folding doors were closed.

As I entered, my fingers came in contact with the electric-light switch, and in order not to stumble against the furniture and thus betray myself, I carefully put on the light.

My eyes turned instinctively to the carpet—to the spot where I had seen the dead man stretched. Yes, before me was the terrible evidence of the crime—the large dark stain, the indelible mark of a man's life-blood.

For a second I stared at it in horror, perhaps in fascination. The room was just as I had last seen it, only the folding doors were closed and the heavy plush curtains drawn back to the wall.

Suppose some one were to open the door and discover me!

The thought held me breathless. I looked round for some means of concealment, and saw that the only way was to hide behind one of the heavy curtains which had been drawn aside but not looped up. In their ample folds my presence could easily pass unnoticed.

Therefore, treading softly, I crossed and switched off the light. As I did so, I discerned a small ray of light shining from the keyhole of the folding doors, and to it I slowly bent and placed my eye, obtaining an uninterrupted view of the interior of the drawing-room.

Upon the hearth-rug before the fire Chiquard was standing addressing Mrs. Kynaston, who, with Gallini and the young Jewess from Genoa, was

seated near. He was speaking in French very slowly and deliberately, his face wearing a dark, intense, determined look.

In dread of discovery I managed to get in between the heavy curtain and the closed door—in that self-same spot where I concluded the assassin must have stood on that fatal night—and then, placing my ear to the crack, listened intently.

All was so silent in that dark room of tragedy that I could hear my own heart thumping with excitement.

What business could this strange and fearless trio have with the owner of the house which they had so openly used in her absence?

As I listened I heard a voice I supposed to be Mrs. Kynaston's exclaim in English—

"But all this is most extraordinary! I had no idea of it. You say that he constitutes a grave danger!"

"Yes, madame," was Chiquard's reply. "From what I have already explained I think you will gather that the situation at this moment is distinctly dangerous."

"And where is Lionel?" Mrs. Kynaston asked. "I fully expected him to meet me when I arrived last night at Charing Cross. I wired to him."

"He's abroad somewhere. The last letter I had —a month ago—was written from Cracow," Chiquard responded.

"I have written him at Boodle's three times lately,

but got no reply. I suppose he is too occupied over his love affairs to remember his old friends," the widow said, with chagrin.

Chiquard laughed.

"He was in London about a fortnight ago," Gallini remarked. "My friend Bonelli, who is waiter in the Carlton grill-room, told me he was there, dining with a lady."

"With *the* lady?"

"No—another lady."

"Curious that he has not replied to me," Mrs. Kynaston remarked. "I want to see him on some most important business. How can I discover his address?"

"His club sends his letters on—without a doubt," Chiquard said.

"But I've written to Boodle's three times, without result."

"Perhaps he scents danger—eh?" suggested Chiquard. "Lionel is a remarkably shrewd fellow, you know."

"But the danger has only just arisen, you say?"

"Exactly. And it increases hourly. As long as the person in question lives, then the danger of our exposure will always exist, especially now that events have taken the unexpected turn they have," Chiquard declared. "For that reason we have met here this evening—to decide upon future action."

A silence fell between them. How strange it was that these persons should be calmly discussing their

affairs with the owner of that house of which they had held illegal possession.

Why was she taking such a keen interest in their welfare? Why should she be called into counsel? Who was the man Lionel? He was a member of Boodle's, and therefore without doubt a gentleman.

The whole affair was a complete mystery.

Gallini was the first to break the silence.

"The future rests now upon him. He knows the truth," he said.

Of whom, I wondered, were they speaking? Was it possible that this widow, Mrs. Kynaston, was, after all, one of the curious association of adventurers?

"And knowing the truth," Gallini went on, "he will not be long in exposing it. Remember that he loves Xenia, and for her sake will hesitate at nothing."

I held my breath. They were surely speaking of myself!

"He must be silenced!" declared the Jewess, speaking in Italian. "It was a pity that we allowed him to escape in Genoa. He was with Mordacq, or he certainly would not have left alive."

"No!" exclaimed the woman Kynaston. "I will never consent to such a measure. I have seen him many times coming out of his house opposite. He can surely be silenced by some other means than that suggested."

"No, he cannot," said Chiquard decisively. "If

our *coup* is to be effectual then he must be removed."

"Merely because he loves Xenia!" cried the widow. "She has not played us false—why should he betray us?"

"For reasons I have already explained," Chiquard said. "I regret if any action is taken which has not your sanction, madame, but the decision, as you must recognise, lies with the majority. Recollect all that we have at stake. We cannot afford to sacrifice ourselves, and all our aims and aspirations, for the sake of one person who stands in our path."

"But you are not aware of how much he really knows," queried Mrs. Kynaston. "You have said that Xenia has not betrayed us. Of course she has not. She dare not risk exposure. Hence, depend upon it, she has been true to her vow, and has told him nothing."

Gallini dissented. He expressed an opinion that I should be secretly got rid of.

"Remember the many who are relying upon our efforts," he urged. "Remember all that we ourselves have suffered, and how much we have all sacrificed and how much we have risked in order to successfully accomplish our object. If we deliberately stand by and allow this Englishman to denounce us, what answer have we to those who, should we fail, will assuredly be arrested wholesale and condemned? Our strength and defiance is our only safeguard against disaster."

For a few moments there was again silence.

Then a heated discussion ensued as to what course should be pursued towards myself, sometimes the conversation being in French, sometimes in English. From it I gathered that the widow's late husband had financed the desperate scheme, whatever it was, to a very great extent, and that upon his death she had somehow become implicated in the affair.

Mrs. Kynaston, averse to foul play, openly declared her intention of warning me of danger, whereupon Chiquard exclaimed, with a laugh of triumph—

"Of what benefit would that be to him? Our vengeance will come swiftly and deadly, whether he be in London or elsewhere. Our eye and hand are, as you know, everywhere."

"Then you really intend to kill him—eh?" cried the widow, in hoarse dismay.

"We shall act just as we think fit, madame," was Chiquard's hard, defiant reply. "Only, I suggest to you that your silence is best."

"And Xenia?" she asked, in a low voice.

"Xenia is in fear, and is therefore powerless," was his response.

"You are certain of that—quite certain?" asked Mrs. Kynaston eagerly. "Remember, if a woman believes her lover to be in grave peril she may sacrifice herself. And if she did, what then?"

"Rest assured that she will never dare to do that. She, in her high position, could never face a criminal trial," he laughed in triumph. "Mordacq knows

that just as well as we do, hence we are quite immune—safe, indeed, even if she went straight to the Emperor and told him the truth."

"Then you are also safe, even though Dr. Vesey should be aware of all the facts!"

"No, we are not. That is just the difference. He is our greatest and most formidable enemy, and as such he must be suppressed."

"How?" inquired the Englishwoman.

"Leave him to us!" cried the Italian Jewess. "We will find a way—quickly and surely—as with others."

"With others!" gasped Mrs. Kynaston: "What others?"

But the girl made no reply, and Chiquard quickly and cleverly turned the conversation.

"And suppose Xenia, for love of the man, decided to sacrifice herself?" suggested Mrs: Kynaston.

"If we thought that for one single moment, then she should not live another day. Both she and her lover should die."

"I have strong reason to believe that she contemplates a terrible revenge upon us," declared the Italian girl. "I have not forgotten her words on that night when she and Lionel Gregory were present. She meant them. She threatened to expose us!"

"Bah! I tell you she dare not," laughed Chiquard. "If I thought that for a moment I would take care that her pretty lips never opened again!"

"Then look at this—read this!" cried the Italian girl fiercely, and I heard the quick rustling of paper, as though she had opened a letter and handed it to him.

He gave vent to a low, ominous grunt, and then I heard them moving about near the door where I stood.

My impulse was to draw my revolver, enter boldly, and face the malefactors. Yet such injudicious action would only cause them to flee in alarm. Were it not for Xenia's sake—because I had promised her secrecy—I would have crept out to the Kensington police station and secured the arrest of all four.

Holding my breath, I stood for a few moments; then, fearing discovery if I remained there further, and forewarned of my peril, I left my place of concealment, groped to the door, stole downstairs, and, with a whispered word to Mrs. Orrock as I slipped a five-pound note into her hand, I left the house.

Back in my own dining-room, my mind full of the mysterious meeting, I sat in the darkness behind the curtains, watching for Chiquard and his friends to leave, and ready prepared to follow them anywhere.

For a full half-hour I remained, but suddenly, having left for a few seconds to speak with Phelps, I returned to the window, only to catch sight of the front door opposite being opened to a tall, slim female figure.

It was Xenia! My lost Xenia.

I flew out of the house in order to stop her, but ere I got out upon the pavement the door had closed behind her. I was too late to warn her!

She had entered innocently and unsuspectingly to those who had secretly, and in silence, pronounced upon her sentence of death!

What course could I pursue, knowing well as I did that to alarm the police would only bring upon my well-beloved a terrible exposure and scandal, nay, death by her own hand?

CHAPTER XXVII

THE NIGHT BOAT TO CALAIS

THOUGH my well-beloved had fled from me without a word, I felt that her mysterious action had been imperative. She was undoubtedly the tool of others. Therefore I blamed her not—only pitied her and loved her.

Yet she was yonder, across the way, in that house of dread mystery, alone and unprotected in the hands of those who intended that a sudden catastrophe should overtake her!

I was beside myself in alarm and despair. Again I rang up Millman, but a reply came that he had not yet returned to the office.

In every way had I been tricked, fooled, and misled. Even the man whom I had, in my innocence, believed to be the Austrian chief of police, and in whom I had trusted, was now proved to be an impostor!

If Chiquard and his friends were Xenia's enemies, why had she gone to visit them at that house across the way? Why, indeed, had she so suddenly disappeared from Genoa and given no sign of her

whereabouts to me, whom she had accepted as friend, if not as lover?

The whole thing was an inscrutable enigma—a secret known only to those ingenious and daring men and women who seemed fully prepared to sacrifice themselves, if necessary, in order to accomplish their object, which was itself shrouded by such mystery.

Still in shabby overcoat and cap, I stood in readiness to follow Xenia when she should emerge from that house of plotting.

It was about eight o'clock when, accompanied by the Italian girl who had watched me in Genoa, and who had herself sworn vengeance upon me, she descended the steps and hurried past my house on the opposite side of the way into the High Street.

In a moment I flew out after them.

They were speaking anxiously together as, turning the corner, they walked to the underground station, where they took tickets for Charing Cross. Careful that I should not be noticed, I followed, and while they rode in a first-class compartment, I discreetly went third.

At our destination I allowed them to get on ahead. I saw my well-beloved, neat in black and wearing a long fur coat, her face remarkable anywhere, hurrying quickly up Villiers Street into the bustling Strand, where they both turned into a small restaurant, outside which I waited for nearly half an hour.

Then they entered the Charing Cross terminus, where Her Highness claimed a small green dress-trunk at the cloak-room, and registered it for Paris.

In a quarter of an hour the Continental night-mail would leave. Already that strange miscellaneous crowd of third-class passengers, most of them foreigners who leave London nightly, had assembled, together with the busy business men who travel to Paris by night in order to save time.

I watched her speaking rapidly with the Italian girl, apparently giving her some earnest instructions, and then, when I had seen her enter a first-class compartment and settle herself, I also went and obtained a ticket for Paris. I had no luggage, and my attire was not of the most respectable; but, fortunately, I had placed twenty pounds in my pocket, so that I could purchase luggage if necessary.

The woman I so dearly loved was, I knew, threatened by a great, but unknown, danger. Therefore was it not my duty to be near her—to protect her?

The train moved off at last, and through the night rushed on and on, until at length I found myself on Dover Pier. It was a frosty night. The sea was calm, and the moon shining brightly upon the waters as, drawing back in the shadow, I stood watching her as she descended and walked on board the boat. She did not go below, but ordered a sailor to get her a deck-chair. With rapidity the mails were stowed and checked by the official with

the big watch upon his wrist, and the baggage hauled in by the huge clanking cranes, until, with a warning blast upon the siren, the mail-boat cast off and slowly steamed out with bows set for Calais.

Quickly the passengers disappeared below, for the wind was bitingly cold after the warmth of the railway carriages.

Then, summoning courage, I emerged from where I stood, traversed the deck, and halted suddenly before her in silence, with outstretched hand.

Glancing up at me in the semi-darkness, she started, and gave vent to a little cry of surprise. The next second, recognising me, she jumped up, gasping—

"You, Dr. Vesey! Why—why, where have you sprung from?"

"From London with you, Princess," was my low reply.

"Hss-sh!" she whispered. "Some one may overhear. I may be watched. Indeed, I fear I am —I——"

"No doubt you are," I said. "For that reason I am here at your side. Come farther along," I urged. "We shall be alone, and can talk without fear of eavesdroppers."

She did as I suggested, and, as together we leaned against the bulwarks, our backs turned towards the long stream of moonlight upon the waters, I asked her why she had so suddenly left me in Genoa.

"Ah!" she replied, drawing a long breath. "I—well, I did so for your sake."

"For my sake—why?"

"Because had I been longer with you it might have been fatal—fatal for us both!"

"I don't really understand, Princess," I said. "What can you fear?"

"I fear several things," she replied, and my hand being upon her arm, I felt distinctly that she trembled violently. "Oh, I wish you had not met me now! Our companionship can only bring us unhappiness—perhaps death!" she cried. "And why should you die, when your only offence has been that you have acted as an honest, upright man and assisted a woman in her dire distress?"

"Exactly," I said. "That is just the reason why I followed you to-night from London—from that house in Argyll Road."

She started, and, turning towards me, asked—

"Then you know? You know that I went there?"

"I watched you enter, Princess, and I saw you leave," I said very quietly. "I am fully aware of those who were present, for I myself was in that house not ten minutes before your arrival there."

"You!" she gasped. "You were actually there?"

"I was — in the room adjoining that in which Mrs. Kynaston was entertaining her friends—the room in which a tragedy took place."

"And you listened? You heard what was said?" she asked in a hard, changed voice. "You have learned my secret!" she whispered.

"I have learned that those assassins intend that both you and I shall die!" I said.

"They have decided that I shall be silenced!" she cried. "Ah! I suspected as much. Who made the proposal—tell me?" she urged.

"You were denounced by that Italian girl. She had some letter or other which she produced," I said.

"By Carlotta Ferri!" she gasped, staring at me. "I saw her in Genoa. She came to me, warning me to leave in secret because a plot had been formed against us. Had I not left that night—left without a word to Mordacq or to yourself—we should neither of us be alive to-day. I am convinced of that!"

"But was that man really Mordacq?" I queried. "I have seen his photograph—which is of a man of quite a different stamp."

"Of course it is Mordacq," she assured me. "Our Chef du Sûretè is not so injudicious as to have his photograph publicly exhibited and reproduced in newspapers. You are not the first person who has been puzzled. The photograph always published as his is that of one of the inspectors of the *brigade mobile* of Vienna."

"Where is Mordacq now?" I asked, much gratified by her explanation.

"Who knows? He is ubiquitous — here to-day and gone to-morrow—flitting ever from capital to capital."

"But you have seen him since your flight from Genoa?"

"We met at the Château of Schönbrunn four days later. I was with the Emperor," was her brief reply.

"And why did you not communicate with me?" I asked, in a low voice of reproach, slowly taking her hand and looking into her eyes as she turned her face towards the moon. "You must know, Princess, how full of apprehension I have been—how thoughts of you fill my whole mind — how——"

"I know!" she exclaimed, interrupting me; "forgive me for not writing to you, but my silence was imperative. I feared to bring a terrible vengeance upon you. Since I left the Emperor—he having summoned me to Schönbrunn, as he wished to speak to me — I have been living in the Tyrol at Gleichenberg, the castle of my father, the Grand Duke Leopold. I knew of all your movements from Chiquard, who met me in Innsbruck."

"From Chiquard!" I cried. "Then he travelled there in order to see you?"

She merely nodded in the affirmative.

So her father was the Grand Duke Leopold of Austria, brother of His Majesty the Emperor

Francis-Joseph! Her sister was, I recollected, Crown-Princess of Roumania.

"Princess," I said, bending towards her earnestly, "when I strove to free myself from—from my fatal attachment, you would not allow me. You urged me to remain your friend. I have done so; I am here now as your friend. Therefore cannot you tell me the reason for all this secrecy—the reason why that young man lost his life in Argyll Road—the reason of this strange yet desperate conspiracy?"

"No," was her firm response, "I cannot. I—I dare not." Then she added quickly, in a voice broken by emotion: "I value your friendship very much, Dr. Vesey, and for that reason I will not risk losing it by revealing to you the truth."

"Then you will rather risk your life and mine than arm me against my enemies?" I said reproachfully.

"The risk is great, I admit," was her slow, deliberate reply. "Chiquard and his friends are desperate. They have decided that your existence is dangerous to their schemes—because they believe that I have revealed certain things to you. Your acquaintance with me has brought this grave peril upon you. It is I who am to blame. If you fall a victim, then the blame will rest upon me!" she cried, her beautiful face drawn and pale beneath the white light. "To me alone all your unhappiness is due, and now a grave and constant danger threatens you!"

"And you also, Princess, I fear," I said. "But why cannot I go to the London police and relate all that I know? It seems really monstrous that these people should meet and plot beneath the very eyes of the authorities, and yet we who know remain silent!"

"No! No!" she cried, in quick alarm. "Do not suggest such a thing. If you did, great injury would result—a serious catastrophe to our Imperial House. The truth must be suppressed at all costs. After I left you in Genoa I begged of the Emperor to allow you to tell them at your Scotland Yard. But he would not hear of it—even though he personally has so much at stake."

"But His Majesty surely cannot stand by and allow you, his niece, to be sacrificed by those dastardly assassins!" I exclaimed.

"He said that it must all be left to Mordacq."

"Did you not tell him of your own peril?"

"No. There are certain facts which I have withheld from him—facts which constitute my own secret," she replied in a strange, hard tone. And her white lips pressed together as tears welled in her wonderful eyes.

I took her tiny hand again, and, with a sudden movement, raised it fervently to my eager lips.

What mad, passionate words I uttered I scarcely know. I remember, however, that while I held her thus I placed my right hand upon her shoulder and looked straight into her eyes.

No one was about on deck—we were quite alone. Already we were in sight of the thousand twinkling lights and the broad flashing beams of electricity of Calais harbour when I bent to her ear and whispered—

"Princess! You know—you surely have seen how fondly, how very devotedly—I—I love you! I confess it! I cannot conceal my secret any longer. I realise, alas! too plainly that we can never be more to each other than mere friends. Yet—yet you are all in all to me! For your dear sake I will willingly sacrifice myself in order that you—the only woman who has ever entered my heart—may live, and may gain peace and happiness. Tell me what I may do so that you may be safeguarded from the bitter vengeance of those who believe themselves betrayed. Princess, I love you—you alone and only you!" I added in a low, intense voice, my eager lips close to hers.

Her face was sphinx-like. A strange, convulsive shudder shook her frail frame, and for a few seconds she did not speak. Then, in a voice so faint that I could scarce catch the words above the swish of the dark sea, she said—

"Yes, Hubert, I—I know, alas! I know! And though I have been your enemy—nay, I am your enemy at this moment—yet I—ah!—how can I confess it after all that I have done!" she cried, covering her face with her hands and bursting into a flood of hot tears. "Yes, though I am your

enemy, Hubert," she faltered, "nevertheless, your affection for me is not unreciprocated."

"Then you love me!" I gasped, breathless in delight, still holding her in my arms. "Is this really true, Princess!" I cried, overjoyed.

For answer she slowly nodded, her pointed chin sunk upon her breast, her head bent and her frame shaken by a choking sob.

"Forgive me for what I have done," she murmured indistinctly; "forgive me my terrible sin—forgive me, Hubert," she implored, gripping my hand, "forgive!"

And fixing her splendid eyes upon mine in the furtive light she panted in the intensity of her appeal.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE GRAND DUKE AT HOME

SIX days had elapsed.

It was nine o'clock in the evening.

I followed a tall, gigantic servant in the blue Imperial livery up the broad, red-carpeted staircase of a big white mansion in the Avenue des Champs Élysées, close to the Place de l'Étoile—the Paris residence of His Imperial Highness the Grand Duke Leopold.

At the head of the marble stairs I was met by the grey-haired major-domo, who, bowing low, opened a pair of long, white doors, and entering the splendid salon, pronounced my name with a strong French accent.

Xenia, in a pretty evening gown of pale carnation chiffon, rose quickly with a cry of pleasure, and came forward to me with outstretched hand and words of glad welcome.

Near the fire the Grand Duke, her father, a tall, distinguished-looking, grey-bearded man in evening-dress, was standing. We had been introduced three days before, and he greeted me cordially.

There was splendour displayed everywhere. The great white-and-gold room was upholstered in pale green silk, the backs of the chairs bearing the Imperial crown and cipher embroidered in gold thread, while splendid pictures, rare bric-à-brac and costly old Persian rugs gave to the apartment an air of cosiness, notwithstanding its huge dimensions.

"My daughter expected you last night, Dr. Vesey!" exclaimed the Grand Duke with a smile.

"I only returned from London at five o'clock this evening," I said, glancing at Xenia, and noticing how well her gown suited her.

Across her hair was a band of pearls, and upon her neck one magnificent diamond suspended by a thin platinum chain, while in the edge of the low-cut corsage showed a small bow of crimson and white watered ribbon—the ribbon of that much-coveted decoration, the Austrian Order of Elizabeth, in memory of the late Empress.

In her glance I detected an eagerness to speak with me alone. On my return to Paris I had found her urgent note at the Chatham, and had come there to learn the latest development of the remarkable tangle of events which had so mystified me.

The Grand Duke, a charming, easy-going man of polished manner, had treated me with greatest kindness, why, I could not tell. As I sat there, he said in good English—

"I find, Dr. Vesey, that I have to thank you

for certain services which you have rendered to my daughter, Xenie. I am really most grateful to you."

I disclaimed having been of very much service, yet I wondered if she had actually confessed the truth to her father. Surely he, in his position, would not look upon me, a mere commoner, with favour as suitor for his daughter's hand.

Yes, the barrier of birth was, indeed, insurmountable. What a fool I was to allow myself to love her so intensely. Yet she was all in all to me, and she had actually confessed that my love for her was not in vain.

If the Grand Duke suspected the truth would he thus receive me in the intimacy of his family? One life only remained between the Austrian throne and himself. Often had I read in the papers of his enormous wealth, of the magnificence of his great medieval Castle of Gleichenberg in the Tyrol, of his splendid palace in the Ring-Strasse in Vienna, his great villa on the Adriatic shore at Zara, and his *pied-à-terre* in Paris—the great mansion in which I was now received.

Strange what acute turns one's life sometimes takes! Here was I, an unknown medical man, on intimate terms of friendship with the man upon whom the eyes of Europe had for so long been set — nay, deeply in love with his daughter, the Princess Xenia.

His Imperial Highness offered me a Russian cigarette from his gold case, and together we smoked

and chatted, while Xenia in a low chair leaned her pointed chin upon her hand, and joined in our conversation.

"My daughter tells me that she has been lately persecuted by certain undesirable individuals!" her father exclaimed at last. "And that you—although in ignorance of her real name and position—have volunteered as her protector. The Emperor has, I hear, also been told this and has expressed his gratitude to you."

"I have only done what any other man would have done," I replied.

"From what I am told there is considerable mystery regarding the movements of the persons in question," he went on. "Please tell me who they are."

My quick eye caught sight of Xenia's countenance. It had suddenly changed, and I saw in her knit brows and quick expression an intense appeal to me to say nothing.

"Well," I said, with considerable hesitation, "I—I really don't know. They are most mysterious in their actions."

"You have met them, Dr. Vesey, and therefore you know them," His Highness said, glancing at me very seriously. "Have you met the young Englishman, Lionel Gregory?"

A quick, hard-drawn breath from my well-beloved caused me to turn, and I saw that her face had become blanched to the lips. This pointed question of her father's was utterly unexpected.

Lionel! That was the name uttered by Mrs. Kynaston. She had expressed wonder that he had not met her on her arrival at Charing Cross from India. What could the Grand Duke know of him?

"I, one evening, overheard the name of Lionel as that of a man who was away and whose address was unknown. It was mentioned in London by a lady named Kynaston, who has, I believe, recently returned from India."

"Ah yes!" exclaimed His Highness, with a sigh. "Lionel Gregory is undoubtedly missing—and I fear will never be found, poor fellow."

A low cry at my side caused me to start, and glancing at Xenia we were both alarmed to observe that she had fallen back in her chair in a dead faint.

She had collapsed at mention of the name of Lionel Gregory! Why?

The Grand Duke touched a bell to summon a servant, while I, taking some water from a big bowl of lilies of the valley, held my love in my arms and endeavoured to restore her. Soon a well-dressed young lady, whom His Highness addressed as Countess—a maid-of-honour—came with a big silver bottle of smelling-salts, and in a few moments the Princess had again recovered consciousness. Then she rose and accompanied the young Countess from the room, not, however, before she had begged me in a whisper to remain, as she wished to speak with me.

When the door had closed I turned to the Grand

Duke—who had remarked that he feared that the heat of the room must have upset her—and said—

"Your Highness spoke of a young man named Lionel Gregory. Was he a fair-haired young fellow of about twenty-five, with fair moustache and grey eyes? Did he wear a signet-ring with a flying swallow as crest upon it?"

"Why, that is his description exactly! Then you know him!" cried His Highness excitedly.

"No, I do not know much of him," was my calm reply.

"You have seen him. Tell me where he is."

"Your Highness's own fears are, alas! realised. He is dead."

"Dead?" he gasped. "Are you quite certain? When—how did he die? Are you quite certain that he is dead?"

"Absolutely. I saw him lying cold and stark—murdered!"

"Murdered?" cried His Highness in horror. "Ah, my poor daughter — my poor Xenie! What a terrible blow it will be to her when she learns the truth! But tell me, doctor—tell me all that you know of the tragic affair. The poor lad was devoted to Xenie, and she to him. She loved him, but he disappeared suddenly—and without a word."

I held my breath in blank surprise. Then the man who was so foully done to death was none other than the Princess's lover! I ought to have suspected as much. Was it possible that the

mysterious crime which she had asked me to forgive was her connivance at his death! Did she actually know of the trap which Michel Chiquard and his accomplices had so cunningly baited for him, and failed to warn him?

But Xenia's meaning glance at me just before she had fainted prevented me from revealing the true circumstances, further than to tell him how I had been called by the police to a house in Kensington, where I had seen the body of a young man answering to the description of Lionel Gregory.

"Perhaps it would be as well if your Highness said nothing to the Princess of what I have just explained," I suggested. "Before alarming her it would probably be well to ascertain whether the body was really that of her missing friend."

"Yes, I agree," he said. "But did not the police make inquiry? Did they not trace the assassin?"

"No. It is still a complete mystery. I saw the detective-inspector only the other day regarding it."

"I must summon Mordacq," said the Grand Duke decisively. "He is in Brussels just now. He will be able to discover the truth, no doubt. No secret is ever a secret from him."

"But I beg that your Highness will say nothing to alarm the Princess," I urged. "I had no idea that she and the dead man were lovers."

"Unfortunately, they were," he admitted. "They met on the Lake of Como and became mutually

attracted by each other. For a year I knew nothing of the secret affair until I was told by one of the court officials in Vienna. Young Gregory, though he bore an English name and had been educated at Cambridge, was really Hungarian. His great-grandfather, a wealthy Englishman, settled in Bosnia, where he acquired very large estates and became ennobled by Francis II. The Counts Gregory of Zenica have, for nearly a century, been the most powerful family in Bosnia, but unfortunately, because Lionel's father bitterly opposed the Emperor recently, when Austria annexed Bosnia, his estates were confiscated, and, ruined, he died last year in exile in Russia. Poor Lionel! Xenia introduced him to me in Vienna, and I must confess that I liked him, even though he was bitterly opposed to the Emperor—which, after all, was but natural, for in a single day he had been rendered penniless."

I was silent. The fact that the murdered man had been the Princess's lover gripped my heart. In that instant the iron entered my very soul.

So her great secret stood revealed! At mention of his name she had fainted. Why? I stood facing the Grand Duke too perplexed to utter further word.

What was the crime of which my well-beloved had accused herself? Why had she said that, in order to retain my friendship, she dare not reveal to me the ghastly truth!

Why—ay, why?

CHAPTER XXIX

ANOTHER SENSATION IN KENSINGTON

THE mystery increased daily.

Next morning I wrote to the Princess, urging her to meet me at Armenonville in the Bois—where we had met one morning in secret a few days previously—but, to my dismay, the messenger returned to me with the letter, stating that she had left for Vienna by the express at seven o'clock.

I took a taxi and called upon the Grand Duke, but the tall liveried servant told me that His Imperial Highness had also left suddenly for Austria with his daughter.

So with a heavy heart I packed my bag and departed from the Gare du Nord that afternoon for London. Back again in the gloomy Argyll Road I wrote to Xenia at her father's palace in the Ring-Strasse at Vienna, begging of her to see me, and announcing my readiness to travel to Austria at once if she permitted.

Time after time did I glance across at that dark house occupied by Mrs. Kynaston, but the blinds were down, and the place was closed again. I

recollected the decision of the conspirators regarding myself, and now constantly carried my revolver loaded. A strange presage of evil obsessed me. At any moment I might be attacked in secret by men whom Mordacq had admitted were most desperate characters.

The whole enigma set my brain constantly awhirl.

One thing alone was certain—that Xenia and I loved each other—ah, loved as no man and woman in the world had loved! Of other things, all seemed enshrouded in a veil, in mystery that was becoming more and more impenetrable.

As the days passed without word from my well-beloved, I made diligent inquiry regarding young Count Gregory, and discovered that he had spent two years at Jesus College, where he had been most popular. The sudden reverse of his father's fortune, owing to Austria, in defiance of the Powers, tearing up the Treaty of Berlin and annexing Bosnia and Herzegovina in direct opposition to the feeling of the independent inhabitants, had caused him to leave Cambridge and return to his father's Castle of Zenica. The flying swallow, the crest upon the signet-ring worn by the poor young man, was, I found, the crest of the Gregory family.

For hours I sat in my dining-room concealed behind the heavy green rep curtains watching those who passed up and down the road, my eyes ever open to discover Chiquard or any of his companions. Of the girl, Carlotta Ferri, I had been forewarned,

therefore I maintained a constant vigilance. And for Xenia's safety I was ever anxious, for without a doubt, now that they had decided upon sinister methods, they would follow her to Austria.

Again I wrote, beseeching her to be wary, but not until a fortnight later did I receive a brief and apparently hurriedly written letter, in which she urged me to remain reassured, and promised that we should meet again when circumstances permitted. The letter was written from the Château of Gleichenberg, and concluded with the words, "Your unhappy Xenie."

So I was compelled to live on through the months of March and April in the quiet dulness of Argyll Road, ever expecting some fresh incident to occur, and ever longing to meet again the sweet-faced woman who held my future in her hands.

As I sat in my silent old-fashioned back room, I day after day reviewed the whole of the strange circumstances and tried to solve the intricate problem. Why had Xenia, the instant her lover had died, sought protection of me, a perfect stranger? It was certainly not by chance. She had told me as much.

That fact in itself constituted a complete enigma.

Once, late at night, while walking along Piccadilly from the club, I saw Gallini strolling with a young foreigner who looked like a waiter off duty. I watched them turn into the Gambrinus, in Regent Street, laughing together.

I waited for half an hour, until they emerged,

whereupon Gallini parted from his friend, and entering a taxi drove off. I started to follow in another taxi, but my driver, alas! proved a fool. To my chagrin, in the crowd of vehicles in Coventry Street coming from the theatres, he mistook the cab we were following, and when we arrived at Regent's Park a lady alighted from the taxi in which I believed Gallini to be.

On the morning of the 19th of April, while I sat at breakfast, Phelps entered with several letters and parcels. One letter was a hurried line from my well-beloved, telling me to leave London at once and exercise the greatest care that I was not followed. "Your every movement is being watched," she added, "so exercise the greatest care."

My eyes had constantly been on the alert, yet I felt convinced that I had not been followed. Therefore I smiled, gratified at my love's desire for my welfare, yet ridiculing the idea of any real danger.

She said nothing about meeting me—only urged me to escape in secret from London.

Truly I had done much travelling since that fateful December night when she had so suddenly and unexpectedly come into my life.

I opened the other letters before proceeding with my breakfast, and then the parcels. There were two—one of cigarettes, and the second bearing the label of my bootmaker in Jermyn Street, a pair of boots which I had recently been to order.

I cut the string, but as I did so a blood-red flash

blinded me, there was a terrific deafening explosion, and I was struck a heavy blow in the chest which rendered me senseless.

When I again opened my eyes my gaze fell upon an amazing scene. My jaw smarted, the air was filled with suffocating fumes, smoke, and dust, the the room was wrecked, part of the ceiling was hanging down, the bay-window had been blown into the street, and the big, old-fashioned side-board reduced to a shapeless mass.

I felt something upon my face, and touched it with my hand, which I found covered with blood.

My left shoulder pained me sharply as Phelps, white as a sheet, assisted me to rise, while outside in the street I saw that a great crowd had assembled.

"What happened, sir?" gasped Phelps breathlessly. "We thought it was gas at first. Was it, sir?"

"I—I hardly know," I managed to articulate, as, struggling unsteadily to my feet, I gazed about me in utter amazement. The room was a total wreck. Apparently the full force of the explosion had passed in the opposite direction to myself, towards the window, and I had thus had a most miraculous escape.

The heavy mahogany dining-table had been shattered to matchwood, the chairs, heaped and broken, were lying about in various directions, while the closed door had been blown out into the hall, and the great oval mirror over the mantel-shelf reduced to a thousand fragments.

I hobbled into my study, and looking into the mirror could not help smiling at the figure I presented. Blood was flowing from a large gash beneath my jaw, while two fingers of my left hand had been pretty badly damaged. My coat was singed, and my ear was cut, but after a wash and the application of some court-plaster I soon recovered and congratulated myself upon my narrow escape.

As was natural, a great crowd gathered from the High Street, and the police were quickly upon the scene.

To the three constables and sergeant I attributed the explosion to an escape of gas—an explanation with which they were perfectly satisfied, as, though I used electric light, one of the old gas-fittings had now become dislocated, and a strong smell of it pervaded the room.

I told them nothing of the parcel of boots which bore my bootmaker's label, but which, without doubt, had contained a deadly and powerful bomb.

Xenia had somehow obtained knowledge of the intentions of those who sought my death, but was unaware of the means to be employed.

Surely theirs was a dastardly action, to send a bomb to me through the post as an innocent parcel of boots. The fact that they had watched me to the bootmaker's, had ascertained that I had given an order, and secured one of the firm's blank labels, showed how cunning and ingenious they were.

I became filled by fierce anger, and determined at all costs to retaliate. A deliberate attempt had

been made upon my life, and Chiquard and his blackguardly friends, fearless though they were, should not now go unpunished.

I knew that I was watched. Now that they had failed, the surveillance upon me would certainly be redoubled. The means they would now employ would, no doubt, be more desperate.

So I called in a builder, who boarded up the window of the wrecked room, and I possessed myself in patience, at the same time exercising the greatest and most constant precaution.

In a few days the cuts upon my face and fingers healed, my shoulder grew less painful, and gradually I became myself again.

I went forth no more than I could help, and never after dark. It would have been easy to have confided in Millman and obtained police protection, but in order to do so I would, I knew, be compelled to reveal certain facts. And this in face of Xenia's position, and my own vow to her of secrecy, I was unable to do.

On the third of May, at half-past nine o'clock at night, while I sat smoking and reading the evening paper, I received an urgent telegram from the Chief of the Vienna Sûreté. It was in English, and read—

"Come to Vienna at once. Earnestly desire your assistance. X—— awaits you here. Aware of your escape, and congratulate you. I will meet you at Westbahn Station on arrival."

It was signed by those mystic initials which

indicated the Director of the Bureau of Secret Police—the ubiquitous Mordacq himself.

Packing a bag hastily, I left Charing Cross next morning at nine, and, crossing to Ostend, joined the wagon-lit express, arriving, after an uneventful journey at Passau, the Austrian frontier, at noon on the following day.

While the train was waiting in the long, bare station, and Customs' officers were busy examining baggage, a thin, keen-faced man in black entered my compartment and, raising his hat, inquired in French if I were Dr. Vesey, of London.

On my replying in the affirmative, he explained that he was the commissary of police at the frontier, and had been ordered to report my passage by telegraph to his chief in Vienna. And then he bowed politely and withdrew.

Six hours later, after passing by Wels and Linz up the valley of the Danube, I stepped out at last in the great echoing station of Vienna, and almost instantly a tall, shabbily dressed man, looking very thin and pale, almost consumptive, stood before me.

It was Mordacq. At first glance I failed to recognise him, so clever was his disguise as a seedy, ailing individual, who looked as though he might only that day have been discharged from the hospital.

"My dear friend," he whispered, "I am much gratified that you have come. A great anxiety is now lifted from my heart, anxiety for Her Highness the Princess."

"For her—how?" I gasped.

"Wait, and you will see."

A man came up for my luggage ticket, and at a glance I saw that he was a police agent.

"Drive to the Hôtel Bristol. Your rooms are engaged there—in the name of Vernon," smiled the renowned Chef du Sûreté. "I will join you in an hour—after you have washed."

Five minutes later I was driving in a closed cab along the busy Mariahilfer-strasse to the Kartner-Ring, where the Bristol is situated.

The moment I entered the hall and gave my name, I saw that I was regarded as a visitor of distinction, for I was shown to my rooms by the manager himself.

There, in about an hour, Mordacq, spruce and smartly dressed as usual, entered my cosy private salon, and, as he lit a cigarette, looked into my face with a mysterious, amused expression, saying—

"You have had an exciting experience in London," he remarked in French. "I heard of it. *Mon Dieu!* It was a close shave for you. They intended you should die!"

"Yes. But I cannot see why."

He laughed.

"Before long, my dear friend, you will discover the reason," he said, blowing a cloud of smoke from his lips. "Indeed, before midnight to-night, I anticipate that you will learn much that will amaze you."

CHAPTER XXX

MORDACQ EFFECTS A *COUP*

MORDACQ gave me a message from the Princess, and punctually at nine o'clock that night, in the drizzling rain, I met her at the corner of the broad Franzensring, where the trams turn round into the Universitatstrasse.

My heart beat quickly as I gripped her hand.

Dressed in cheap black, with a close-fitting hat, a common fur boa around her throat, lisle thread gloves, and carrying an umbrella, none would have dreamed her to be an Imperial Highness. Indeed, she looked more like a lady's-maid.

I laughed at her simplicity of attire, but disregarding my remarks, she simply asked, "Have you brought your revolver?"

I replied in the affirmative.

"Then come with me," she said determinedly. "I have an appointment in a house here." And she led me across the road, past the great Hofburg Theatre, and through a number of intricate streets, until we suddenly emerged into the broad Stephan's Platz, where, behind the church, she turned into a narrow thoroughfare, and then said—

"Remain here, and do not be seen. I am going to that house a little farther up—the one with the red blinds. I will not be long. Perhaps I shall require your presence."

"Why?" I inquired.

"Wait and see," was her enigmatical response. Then leaving me, she went swiftly along the street to the door of the house she had indicated, which fell open and admitted her.

When would some solution of the problem present itself?

Some fresh trickery was apparently in progress. What could it be? I waited anxiously, my eyes glued upon that closed door.

A wretched-looking man, unkempt and ragged, shuffled past me, glancing inquiringly into my face, and disappeared down the quiet, deserted street; but he was the only person in the vicinity. The wind blew cold, and it recommenced to rain, therefore I took shelter in a doorway, where I waited listening to the striking of the great clock of St. Stephan's.

Eagerly I watched for my love's reappearance, but she came not. Half an hour, nay, an hour, went by without sign of her. The light burned brightly behind those red blinds, but the house was silent, and the door still closed.

At last another person, a young man with his arm in a sling, hurried past me and disappeared down the street, and after him came a policeman in

uniform with a deliberate gait, who passed the end of the street, giving it a single glance as he went by.

The quarter between the Singerstrasse and the Schulerstrasse was an extremely quiet one, though in the centre of the capital, for the houses were apparently occupied by respectable middle-class Viennese.

Of a sudden, the door of the house opened, and from it emerged a man who came hurrying in my direction. I drew back, and as he passed I recognised that it was none other than the bogus Count Gallini.

In an instant the peril of my well-beloved became impressed upon me. She had gone there, to that house, and boldly faced those who intended that she should die—those assassins who had already made a dastardly attempt upon my life.

I glanced at my watch. She had been there nearly two hours. Therefore, putting my revolver into the outer pocket of my overcoat, I determined upon taking desperate action.

In a few moments I was before the door, but ere I could pull the bell, I was confronted by a man whom I instantly recognised as the police agent Donat.

"Hs-s-h!" he commanded, and next second I was startled to find half a dozen men had sprung from nowhere and were around me.

Mordacq, ill-dressed and untidy, was among them, and without a word to me he gave vent to a low,

peculiar whistle, which caused quite twenty additional men to appear from the dark shadows.

Then I saw that Donat had something in his hand—a long iron crowbar. Noiselessly he placed the sharpened end between the door and the jamb, and three willing hands grasped it.

"Now!" some one commanded. And next moment the bolts were torn asunder, and we were in the passage.

With Donat, Mordacq, and a dozen others, we rushed straight into a room at the end, where a strange sight met our gaze.

Chiquard, his face white and hard-set, with two well-dressed men who were strangers to me, and the Italian girl Ferri, stood facing us in alarm, each with Browning revolvers raised; while seated in an old arm-chair, her arms and legs secured by ropes, my well-beloved reclined, deathly white and unconscious. She had fainted.

I had rushed towards her, when I saw that set directly in front of her was a small chess-table, and upon it an oblong tin box.

"Take care!" shouted Mordacq. "Don't touch that box!"

But as he uttered the word Chiquard, quick as lightning, snatched it up and raised it to hurl at the Director of Police and his agents.

As he did so, the sharp report of a revolver rang out, and the fellow dropped like a stone, with a bullet through his brain.

He still had the box in his death-grip, but Mordacq, in an instant, seized it, and, like a madman, dashed out of the house with it.

Those moments were full of the most intense excitement. A bullet whizzed past my ear. Several shots were exchanged by the two men and the police; but both they and the girl were quickly overpowered and disarmed, not, however, without a desperate struggle.

Then just as Mordacq was re-entering the room, a most fearful explosion made the very earth tremble, and caused us to look at each other in dismay.

"That's far better outside in the street than in here," exclaimed the Chef du Sûreté, with a grim smile. "In another minute we should all have been blown to atoms. That was their revenge. The brutal villains enticed Her Highness here, secured her, and placed on the table before her that terrible bomb with a clockwork fuse. No wonder the poor lady fainted when she realised the horrible death which must overtake her."

And as he said this, he assisted me to sever the cords, and with water I slowly restored my well-beloved to consciousness.

I recognised the truth. She had come there to meet and defy them, but she had never dreamed of the fearful fate they had so cunningly prepared for her.

The three prisoners became very violent, though I saw that one of the men had been badly wounded in the shoulder, for blood was streaming from it.

Yet the trio still defied the police, for, laughing hysterically, the woman cried in Italian—

"You have been very clever, Colonel Mordacq, but it has not ended yet. We will all die together!" And she shrieked again in wild triumph: "We will die for freedom!"

"That woman has something concealed in her dress," I whispered quickly to Mordacq. "I saw her place it there as we came in."

In a moment my friend had thrown himself upon her. And none too quickly, either, for in a large pocket made apparently for the purpose was a long cylindrical case of steel, afterwards proved to be filled with one of the most terrible and deadly explosives known to modern science.

Like a demon, the woman fought for its possession, but it was wrenched forcibly from her hand.

"Ah!" exclaimed Mordacq grimly. "So it was this that was meant for the Emperor to-morrow as he rode out to the review—eh? You intended to mix with the crowd and hurl it as he passed!"

But the woman, sullen and thwarted in her terrible retaliation, made no answer, though her black eyes flashed fire at her accuser.

The scene was an intensely dramatic one. Chiquard was lying face downwards upon the carpet, dead; while my love slowly recovered consciousness, opening her eyes widely and gazing about her utterly bewildered.

Then, instantly, she recognised me. She stretched

forth both her hands with a glad cry of joy. And I knew how well she loved me.

The police agents, every one of whom had been sworn to secrecy, were making a minute investigation of every nook and corner of the house. Two other bombs, similar in construction to that wrested from Carlotta Ferri, were discovered beneath a loose board in the adjoining room, and these were carefully carried outside by a man, to whom Mordacq entrusted them for conveyance to the municipal laboratory for examination.

Outside, a huge turbulent crowd had assembled, alarmed by the terrible explosion which had, it seemed, blown in dozens of windows and wrecked the fronts of several houses, happily without loss of life.

The two men under arrest turned, and with many imprecations accused each other of betrayal; while the woman Ferri, recognising me, poured forth upon me torrents of vituperation in her voluble Italian.

Her Highness, now sufficiently recovered to rise, shuddered when she realised her narrow escape from a most fearful death, and, leaning upon my arm, passed out through the great force of police.

At the pavement, two closed carriages and a prison van had drawn up. Into one of the carriages I handed her, and ordered the man to drive to her father's palace, the huge white building with the sentries before it, which, if you know the Ringstrasse, you will know well.

We had not gone very far when, behind us, showed a bright red flash, and then sounded another explosion which caused us both to start violently, and our horses reared in fright.

Lifting the flap in the rear of the carriage, I peered eagerly back, and distinguished beneath the lamplight two horses on the ground in a dying condition amid the débris of the prison van.

The truth was quickly made plain. One of the prisoners had still a bomb concealed somewhere, and had, in desperation, used it rather than face trial and life imprisonment.

A quarter of an hour later my surmise was confirmed, for Mordacq told me how the woman Ferri had had, it was supposed, a second bomb concealed in the sleeve of her dress, and while in the prison van she must have hurled it upon the floor, killing her two fellow-prisoners and herself, as well as the two detectives riding in the outer compartment of the van, and seriously injuring the driver.

Truly that band of malefactors who had had their headquarters in Argyll Road, Kensington, were most dangerous, defiant, and desperate.

Two minutes' delay would most certainly have resulted in the death of the woman whom I so ardently loved.

Yet a terrible Nemesis had now overtaken them all, for the Director of Police explained how Gallini had been followed and arrested, and that Mrs. Kynaston had been recognised at the frontier at

Passau in the act of passing out of Austrian territory that evening, and had been detained on suspicion.

The *coup* Mordacq had made that night was certainly complete, and ere half an hour had passed news of the two mysterious explosions was being flashed over the wires to every European capital.

You, no doubt, read it in your London morning paper—only you learnt that the conspirators were Russians, and that the plot discovered was a Nihilist one formed against the Tsar.

CHAPTER XXXI

IN WHICH THE TRUTH IS REVEALED

IT was already two o'clock in the morning.

I was standing in a small but elegantly furnished salon on the first floor of the magnificent grand ducal palace, having been summoned there by the Grand Duke Leopold himself.

His Imperial Highness, who had just come in from the Court ball, stood erect and handsome in his dark blue uniform, with many glittering decorations, while beside him stood his son, Prince Ludwig, in dragoon uniform, with the Order of the Golden Fleece at his throat, and several stars upon his tunic.

Near me was his sister, the Princess Xenia, still attired as a lady's maid, and still terribly pale and agitated, while on the opposite side of the room was the famous Chef du Sûreté.

"The Emperor had just entered the ballroom when I received your message, Mordacq," the Grand Duke was saying. "I told His Majesty of the *coup*, and he expressed the greatest satisfaction at your success."

"Yes," cried the Princess. "Had Colonel Mordacq

not exercised such constant vigilance and made himself acquainted with their plans, I should no doubt have fallen a victim, as they most certainly intended."

"It was but my duty, your Highness," declared the Chief of Police, bowing elegantly. "You went to that house in order to make a last appeal to them to spare the life of the Emperor. But they jeered at you and held you powerless in the fatal trap they had prepared."

"But I do not understand it all, Xenia," declared her father, much puzzled. "Now that the plot is broken up and the chief conspirators are dead, will you not explain to us, frankly and truly, how you, an Imperial princess, became associated with those malefactors?"

She stood in silence, her face hard and drawn, her cheeks blanched. For a moment her haggard eyes met mine, then she averted them. By the terrible events of that night she had been rendered nervous and unstrung. As her hand leaned heavily upon the the table I saw that she trembled and was swaying slightly.

"I think, Xenia, you should now tell us the whole truth," urged the young man who had shown such friendliness to me, and who in England had been known as Captain Janesco.

I recollected her words—that to reveal the truth would be to condemn herself, hence her hesitation.

A dead and painful silence ensued. Only the low

ticking of the great gilt clock broke the quiet. We were waiting eagerly for her confession.

"I think Dr. Vesey, to whom you owe so much, should be made aware of the truth," urged the Prince. "He has, at least, stood by you as your best friend when I was compelled to flee. They knew that you had betrayed their secret to me."

"Dr. Vesey has been my friend most truly," she admitted, in a low, hoarse voice—a voice quite unlike her own. "I—I hardly know what to tell you—what to say in extenuation of my actions."

"Tell me the plain truth, Xenie," said her father "It shall be placed before the Emperor, who will certainly judge justly."

She hesitated, her brow knit in perplexity, her eyes fixed straight before her, and standing erect, motionless as a statue.

"You remember, Ludwig," she said at last, in a low voice not much above a whisper, "you recollect, eighteen months ago, when I was with Countess Trauttmansdorff, staying at the Hôtel Victoria at Varenna, on the Lake of Como? I was there as Miss Wilson, and you came over from Bellagio to visit us. You recollect that you were charmed by the quaint little lake-side village. Well, it was there, upon the rustic terrace beside the lake, that I first made the acquaintance of Lionel Gregory. I knew nothing of him, but he spoke Hungarian, and we chatted together. I afterwards learnt who and what he was, while I, on my part, led him to believe that

I was merely the English companion of the Countess. My accent I explained, declaring that I had lived for a number of years in Germany. We stayed at Varenna for a month, and when I left I discovered that we were deeply in love with each other."

And she drew a long breath at the bitter recollection of the past.

"Four months later we were at the Bristol at Beaulieu, enjoying the winter sunshine of the Riviera, and still, as was my habit, being known as Miss Wilson, when to the hotel came Lionel. Often and often we met in secret, up on the Corniche road or at other places, and frequently went for long rambles among the olives, or by the sea, the Countess quite unsuspicious of what was in progress. On one occasion he introduced me to a man named Michel Chiquard, who was staying at the Hôtel Royal, over at Nice. This man I instinctively disliked, though I met him several times, but as the weeks went on my affection for Lionel grew until it became a passion.

"Though an Austrian, he was strongly antagonistic towards the Emperor, whom he blamed for the sudden annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. His father's estate had been confiscated, and he admitted to me that he was now very poor in consequence. Then one day, in his ignorance of my real identity, he told me in strictest confidence how a great and powerful conspiracy against the Emperor's life had been formed at Sarajevo, in Bosnia, with a view to establishing a republic. I stood aghast. Ah, the

agony of that moment will ever remain with me. I loved this man who was plotting to kill His Majesty, my uncle—loved him with all my heart and all my soul! How I managed to conceal my dismay I do not know, but, in order to learn full details of the dastardly plot, I joined them, and was known as Number Nine. Chiquard, I learnt, was a wool-merchant in Sarajevo, and had been mayor of the city, but, like thousands of others, had been ruined because he had dared to oppose the will of the Emperor. This had greatly incensed him, and with a chemist of Trieste, named Spinola, a young man named Gallini, who sometimes passed as his valet, and a girl named Ferri, daughter of a dangerous Italian anarchist living in Fiume, he was engaged in manufacturing bombs. I attended meetings in Brussels, in Paris, and in London—at the house of a Mrs. Kynaston in Argyll Road, Kensington, whose husband, a speculator, had been one of their chief supporters. Ah, how I managed to preserve my terrible secret I know not. I became a revolutionist, plotting against my uncle, and if he died my father would become Emperor!"

She paused to gain breath, for I saw what tumult of emotion was raging within her heart. Her thin lips moved, but no sound came from them.

"Exposure came one night in Milan," she managed to say at last, "where, at a secret meeting arranged there, Chiquard suddenly confronted me with a copy of the London *Graphic*, in which was a full-page

photograph of myself, and beneath it my full title. Lionel stared at it, utterly staggered. I was there and then denounced as a spy, and Chiquard demanded that I should be killed, but Spinola, a crafty, clever man who was carefully preparing the bombs in his rooms in the Rue Blanche in Paris, made another suggestion. He knew that I loved Lionel, and therefore urged the others to spare me on condition that nothing leaked out to the police. If it did—then Lionel should die! Upon this they decided unanimously. At the slightest alarm from the police my lover was to pay the penalty with his life. A week after that," she added, turning to her father, "I presented Lionel to you at the Hôtel Stefanie at Abazzia."

"I remember quite well!" exclaimed the Grand Duke. "I liked the young fellow very much, and never dreamed that he was plotting against our house. Ah, my poor child, I now begin to realise your terrible position."

"Truly it was terrible, father—awful!" she declared. "Daily, nay, hourly, I feared that by some means the police might discover what was in progress, for in Bosnia the conspiracy was widespread, and these men had been chosen as the executive. And any moment the truth might be known, and Lionel would most certainly be foully done to death. But just about that time you will recollect that I went on a visit to Baroness d'Egger, wife of our Minister in Sofia. One night, when at a ball at the Military

Club, you, Dr. Vesey," she said, addressing me, "were pointed out to me by Lionel, who, surprised at seeing you there, told me that you lived in Argyll Road, nearly opposite to Mrs. Kynaston's. He had somehow learnt a lot concerning you, from your brother, I believe, and warned me against being recognised by you. I watched you that evening, though I was very careful to avoid you. In the next few weeks the details of the plot were completed, and at a meeting held in Paris it was arranged that a bomb be thrown at the Emperor as he drove out from the Château of Schönbrunn, as is his habit each morning at ten o'clock. Lots were cast, and it fell to me to throw the bomb—*me*!" she gasped, her eyes wide open, staring out fixedly. "But Lionel immediately volunteered and took my place. And so, in horror, I suddenly found myself bound in silence, for to reveal the fact to the Emperor or to the police would be to sacrifice the man I loved. What could I do? My lips were sealed. Ah, God alone knows the agony I suffered in those dark days of terror and despair. Those desperate men held me powerless in their hateful thraldom.

"The final meeting—six days before the date arranged for the attempt—took place at Mrs. Kynaston's house, on the 10th of December. Shall I ever forget that date? Lionel, who had been staying at the Hôtel Sacher here in Vienna, joined me in Paris, and we crossed to London together. I arrived at four in the afternoon, and leaving my dressing-case

at Charing Cross Station, drove through the fog to Argyll Road. Chiquard was already there, but Gallini and Spinola did not arrive until an hour later, for they were delayed by the fog. We had an improvised meal with some things purchased at a grocer's in the High Street, and afterwards, on the arrival of the others, we went upstairs to consult.

"Hardly had we entered the drawing-room, when Spinola, who had finished the bombs and had conveyed them from Paris, in order to hand them over to Lionel, made the startling statement that a friend —a Bosnian official in Budapest—had warned him that Mordacq, the dreaded Chef du Sûreté, was cognizant of the whole affair. He had learned of it from sources at the palace, and was hastening to London to apply to Scotland Yard for our arrest and extradition. Indeed, the police might arrive there at any moment! Their plot was frustrated. They all turned upon me, Lionel included, and I was compelled to admit that I had told my brother Ludwig and sought his counsel. Then Chiquard demanded revenge—that Lionel's life should be sacrificed—and in a frenzy of anger he himself struck him down with a knife before my very eyes. Ah, it was terrible—terrible! It was my punishment—the death of the man I loved. I saved the Emperor, but at the cost of Lionel's life!"

She paused, panting violently, with both hands placed to her heart as though to still the storm of emotion there.

Hers was a slim, tragic figure as she stood there making confession.

"When I saw poor Lionel fall beneath the blow of the assassin I know not what I did, save to declare that I would go direct to the police. They defied me and jeered at me, telling me that by doing so I would only reveal myself to be a conspirator against the life of the Emperor, in the hope that my father would become Emperor in his stead. I had, alas! written several letters to Chiquard—foolish letters which my love's murderer still held. Chiquard took the bombs and left the house, and not knowing where to go, I followed soon after. I went out upon the pavement into the fog, when, of a sudden, I recollected you. I groped about and found your hospitable door, Dr. Vesey," she said, turning again to me, "and you so generously gave me shelter, though I was a complete stranger."

"I only acted as any other man would have done on such a night," I declared.

"But you were of greatest service to my unfortunate daughter," asserted the Grand Duke. "She has told me much of your kindness."

"Spinola must have watched me enter your house," my well-beloved went on, her eyes fixed upon me. "He must have watched you out, when you went to Charing Cross for my bag, and then going to some public call-office near by he rang me up on the telephone. He watched your return, and was no doubt somewhere in the vicinity when Mrs. Orrock

arrived at the house and made the tragic discovery. He watched the police summon you, and during your absence he called for the purpose of closing my lips, thus preventing the secret being further divulged. I opened the door to him, and in the hall he suddenly drew a knife to kill me. He struck at me, but in his wild excitement his heart failed and he expired at the foot of the stairs before my eyes. Then, terrified and aghast, I snatched up his knife and fled from the house, for is it any wonder that I dared not wait and face you, Dr. Vesey, not knowing how to conceal the awful truth?"

"But after I discovered Spinola in my house, somebody rang me up on the telephone and gave me an appointment at the Danieli in Venice," I said.

"It was Chiquard, no doubt. I expect he watched Spinola enter your house to find me, and had taken a taxi to some call-office. He believed that he spoke with Spinola, for he admitted that to me."

For a few moments I was silent, then I said in a low voice—

"Princess, I quite understand. It is all now plain, and I entirely sympathise with you. Your self-accusation, which so puzzled me, was because by revealing the plot to Prince Ludwig you condemned your lover to his death."

"Yes, alas, I did," she cried hoarsely.

"But you saved the Emperor, Xenie," her brother remarked very earnestly. "His Majesty is aware of that."

"A question no doubt arises in Dr. Vesey's mind

as to why, as Chief of Police, I did not take drastic steps and secure the arrest of the conspirators!" Mordacq exclaimed, interrupting. "But the reason was because His Majesty forbade me. He feared to give publicity to the plot. The treatment meted out to the unfortunate Bosnians at the sudden annexation was not very creditable to the Empire, therefore he considered that it was policy to suppress the fact that there was any disloyalty whatever in Bosnia. He urged me at all hazards to suppress the truth from the European Press. This was impossible if the conspirators were arrested abroad, but as soon as I got them on Austrian territory and caught them red-handed, then my mode of procedure was different. They acted just as I expected them, as desperate persons, to act. Once Her Highness was rescued from them, they wreaked vengeance upon each other, and it became easy to ascribe the revolutionary plot as one in preparation against the Tsar. The public of Europe are in ignorance of the real truth—and every precaution has been taken so that they will ever remain so."

"Xenie," exclaimed the Grand Duke, advancing to his daughter and placing his hand tenderly upon her shoulder, "you have lost your lover—you and he both made equal sacrifice—but you have saved the life of the Emperor, and, indeed, saved our Empire itself, for who knows, when His Majesty is dead, what untoward events will happen in Austria-Hungary, or how greatly will the map of Europe be altered."

And at those simple words of forgiveness the pale-faced girl who had made to us such dramatic confession covered her face with her slim, white hands and burst into tears.

That night, in secrecy, as we stood in one of the corridors, our lips met for the first time in a fierce, passionate caress. She was mine—*mine*!

. . . .

Most men's lives contain at least one exciting chapter of romance. I have told you mine.

I need not refer to the private audience to which, next day, I was commanded by His Majesty the Emperor, save to say that in the presence of the Grand Duke and his daughter Xenia I received the warmest thanks for the services I had been enabled to render the Imperial house of Hapsbourg-Lorraine, and by the hand of the Emperor himself I was decorated with the yellow and blue ribbon and handsome cross of the distinguished Order of the Iron Crown.

Six eventful months have now passed since that fateful night in Vienna when the desperate gang were hoisted by their own petard. Gallini, who, it seems, twice impersonated the murdered Gregory and obtained sums of money, is in prison at Salzburg for ten years, while Mrs. Kynaston has been allowed her liberty and lives in Paris. The most prominent supporters of the plot in Bosnia were known, but it was decided by Mordacq not to court publicity by arresting them.

If you have read the society columns of the news-

papers, you have no doubt wondered why I, a mere obscure Kensington doctor, have been created by Imperial decree a Baron of the Austrian Empire, or why I have recently purchased a charming and compact little estate on the fertile banks of the broad Danube, near Engelszell.

Not one of the many society gossipers have yet dreamed the truth, which I may as well confess—namely, that the dignity has been conferred in order to enable me to marry Xenia, the charming, unaffected daughter of the Grand Duke Leopold.

Love! Was there ever such pure, passionate, and fervent affection as ours? Was ever woman more sweet, more soft-mannered than she? I refuse to believe so. I love her devotedly.

The dark veil which overshadowed her young life has at last been torn asunder, and happiness—ah yes, complete, idyllic happiness—is now ours, and will be ours, we hope, for evermore.

The strange affair of that foggy night in Argyll Road is still an entire mystery to the respectable denizens of Kensington, while even New Scotland Yard continues to regard it as one of London's many unsolved problems, for the famous Chef du Sûreté has, at the Emperor's orders, taken every precaution that the truth shall never be made public regarding those puzzling facts and that exciting sequence of startling events which constituted "The Mystery of Nine."

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Le Queux's

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2. The Sign of the